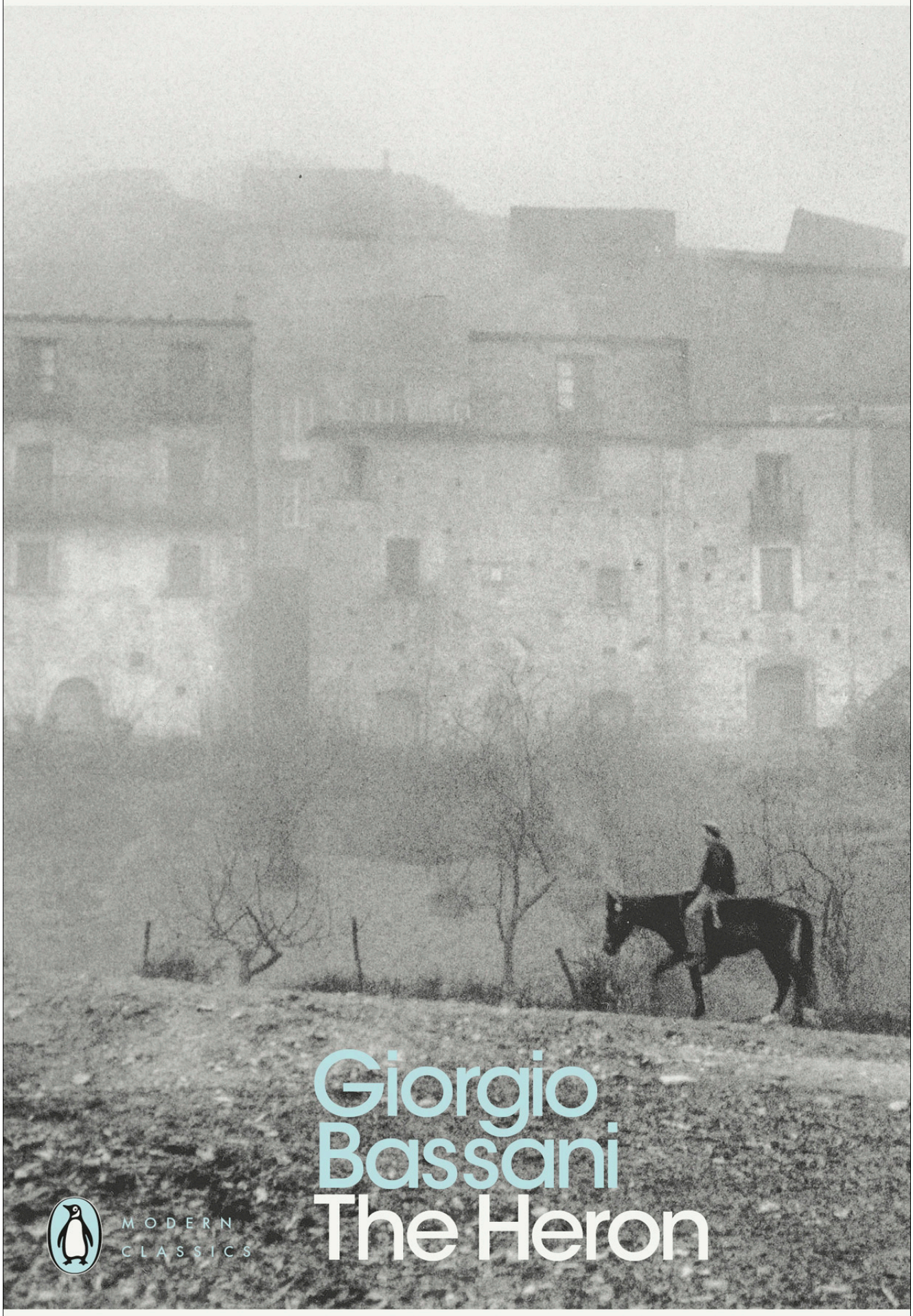
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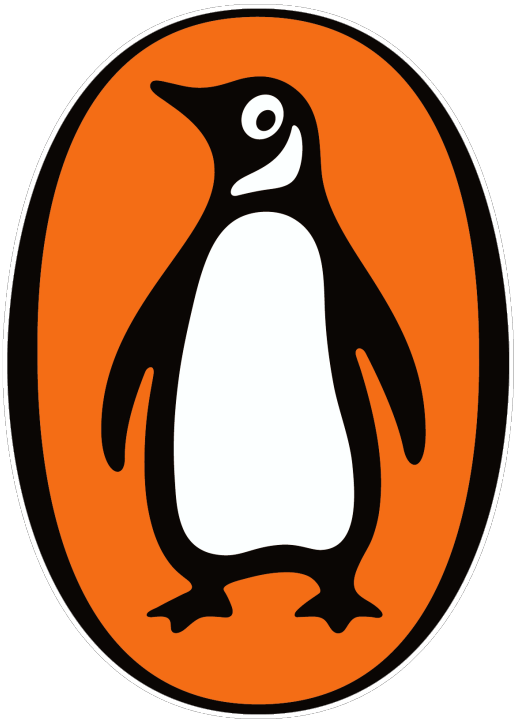

Giorgio Bassani

THE HERON

Translated by Jamie McKendrick

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THE HERON

Giorgio Bassani was born in 1916 in Bologna and spent his formative years in Ferrara. From 1938 onwards he became involved in various anti-Fascist activities for which he was imprisoned in 1943. His works include: *Within the Walls (Five Stories of Ferrara)*, which won the Strega Prize and *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis, which* was awarded the Viareggio Prize and was made into a feature film. Bassani later collected these works along with four others, including The Heron, into a single volume entitled *The Novel of Ferrara*. He died in Rome in 2000.

Jamie McKendrick is an award-winning poet and translator. He has translated all six books of The Novel of Ferrara anew for Penguin Modern Classics.

I

1

Not instantly, but resurfacing with something of a struggle from the bottomless pit of unconsciousness, Edgardo Limentani thrust out his arm in the direction of the bedside table. The small travelling alarm clock which Nives, his wife, had given him three years ago in Basilea on the occasion of his forty-second birthday, kept emitting, at brief intervals, in the darkness, its sharp, insistent though quite discreet alarm. He needed to silence it. Limentani withdrew his arm, opened his eyes, and turned, leaning on his elbow and stretching out his other arm. And at the very moment that his fingertip reached the Jaeger's delicate, already slightly worn buckskin leather and pressed down the button to stop the alarm, he read the time from the hands on the phosphorescent dial. It was four o'clock: exactly when, the evening before, he had decided to wake up. If he wanted to arrive in Volano in good time he shouldn't waste a single minute. What with one thing and another – getting up, going to the lavatory, washing, shaving, dressing, knocking back some coffee and so on, it seemed unlikely he'd be in his car before five.

As soon as he had turned on the light and, seated on the bed, had looked slowly around, he became prey to a sudden sense of listlessness and was tempted to give up, to stay at home.

Perhaps it was because of the coldness of the room, or the faintness of the glow diffused from the central light – but what was certain was that the bedroom, where except for a brief stretch just after his marriage and except, of course, for the later year and a half in Switzerland, he'd slept since his boyhood, had never seemed to him so alien and so squalid. The dark wardrobe, tall, wide and bulbous – his mother had always referred to it as 'paunchy' – which occupied a good part of the left-side wall; the heavy chest-of-drawers on the right-side wall, topped by a small oval mirror, so opaque it was good for nothing, not even for knotting a tie; directly in front of him the mahogany glass showcase for rifles, dwarfed by the grey form of the pelmet; the armchairs; the wheeled clothes-horse on which yesterday afternoon, a good half day early, his mother had set out his woollen suit, with the proper vest and long johns – the other

articles that comprised the whole hunting outfit, including his boots, which she had preferred to leave ready for him in the bathroom; several mounted pictures (that of his degree certificate and those of his own photographs, chiefly of mountains) here and there hung randomly on the walls: each piece of furniture, each of his household goods, each object which fell beneath his gaze discomfited and vexed him. It was as if he were seeing them all for the first time. Or else, more accurately, as if only now was he able to perceive their petty, absurd and irksome aspect.

He yawned. He passed his hand over his cheek and chin, rough with stubble, pushed back the covers, set his feet down on to the floor, took from a chair his fawn-coloured towelling dressing-gown, put it on over his pyjamas, shuffled on his slippers; and after a few moments stood before the window and looked out over the courtyard through the glass and the half-closed shutters.

There was hardly anything to be seen. The courtyard was so steeped in darkness that he could barely make out the well at its centre. And yet from the kitchen window of the Manzolis', the caretakers, streamed a bar of the whitest light: intense enough to reach the top of the high surrounding wall which faced towards Via Montebello, to the highest branches of the tall climbing rosebush which, in summer, almost completely covered the inner side of the wall. Gusts of the sirocco shook and ruffled it. The gusts were dry and light and sudden, as though impelled by an electrical discharge. It wasn't raining. As long as the wind blew, it wouldn't rain.

He turned to look towards the entrance. The door of the ground-floor apartment the Manzoli family occupied was open. From it another light shone out, though far weaker than that from the kitchen window, and suddenly a bent and burdened figure was seen in profile against it.

'Romeo's already up and about,' he muttered to himself.

Attentive and motionless, he followed the caretaker's every move. He saw him go up to the wrought-iron gate which divided the entrance from the courtyard, half-open one of the wings of the gate, step out into the street, look up at the dark sky, and finally, evidently having become aware of him, the owner, he doffed his beret.

He opened the double casement window, and was caught by a gust of soft, damp, almost warm wind as he swung the blinds wide and leant out to fix them to the wall.

He straightened up.

'Good morning,' he said, addressing the caretaker. 'Would you please

tell Imelda, if she's already up, to make me a coffee?'

'Will you be going anyway, *sgnór avucàt*?'[fn1] asked the other in dialect, he too in a soft, lowered tone.

He nodded in the affirmative, and then closed the windows. Moving away from the windowsill, he was in time to notice Romeo once again doffing his beret. How many long years had the Manzolis been in service at their house? he wondered as he entered the bathroom, slightly distracted just as he passed the gun cabinet by the subdued gleam of the rifle barrels behind the glass. They must have been with them, he concluded, for maybe a little more or a little less than forty years.

He took off his dressing-gown, hung it on the hook fixed to the door, let the water in the basin run till it was hot, and took his shaving kit from the leather washbag, all the while observing himself in the mirror.

That face was his own, and yet, all the same, he stood there observing it as if it belonged to someone else, as if not even his own face belonged to him. He checked every detail meticulously and diffidently: his bald convex forehead; the three horizontal and parallel furrows that were etched almost from one temple to the other; the faded blue eyes; the sparse, too emphatically arched eyebrows that gave his whole physiognomy a perennially uncertain and perplexed expression; the nose, rather pronounced, and yet handsome, well designed, aristocratic; the lips, big and protuberant, a little like a woman's; the chin disfigured at its tip by a kind of dint in the form of a comma; the brick-red colouration of his long, lugubrious cheeks, darkened with stubble that was so black it seemed blueish. How malicious and unpleasant, even absurd, his face was! His mother had always maintained, with gratification, naturally, how much it resembled that of the former King Umberto. That might well be so. One thing for sure was that, if the current tide of Communism were to keep on swelling – truly one couldn't see who might be able to halt it … De Gasperi?[fn2] With a face like that? – all the proprietors of farms of a certain size, and among these, as Fate would have it, they too, the Limentani, with their La Montina estate of over 400 hectares, would, very soon, be forced to relinquish their ownership.

He began to lather his face, starting with the point of his chin. And as the lines of his face gradually disappeared under the foam, he began to feel, even more markedly than before, the burden of the day of hunting that awaited him.

It was he alone who had decided on it. And why had he done so? To what end? Wouldn't it have been far better to give up on the idea of

going to the hide for a duck shoot? His cousin, Ulderico Cavaglieri, for instance, although he'd settled for good in Codigoro (and therefore within a stone's throw of the valleys), although, protected, as ever, by the big patriarchal Catholic family he'd amassed over some fifteen years, and even though he could at this stage entirely disregard the Communists, as, earlier on, he'd disregarded the Fascists of the Salò Republic and the German SS, all the same, even he hadn't considered it wise to hang around waiting for the worst all this time. On the contrary. In 1938, in the autumn of '38, soon after the Racial Laws had been declared – Ulderico was then forty years old, while he himself was now forty-five – no, he hadn't let that deny him his gun licence. Not a chance. He hadn't even put in a request, as it had simply been renewed. And in '45, just after the Liberation, he had taken care not to make the mistake of reapplying for it.

He shaved with his usual care, after which, waiting for the bath to fill, he slipped out of his pyjama bottoms and sat on the toilet. For some years emptying his bowels in the morning had become a bit troublesome, and when he couldn't go – either because he'd eaten too much the evening before or because he'd got up too early – then for the whole day he'd feel in the worst of moods, and even suffer from palpitations. As he'd expected, today wasn't going to be easy. But it would hardly be a good idea setting off in this state! There was the risk that he'd have to stop halfway, perhaps without even the possibility of washing.

So he sat there, in the thunderous roar of the water cascading into the bath, keeping an eye on its level, which was rising meanwhile. He thought about the hunt in the valley, about how it had been before the war and how it might be now. Before the war – he remembered – a gentleman from Ferrara could go and fire off a few shots in the region of Codigoro or Comacchio on a Sunday and be quite sure of a good reception and of general respect. More than that, from the practical, the organizational perspective, everything would be precisely pre-arranged – and one could tell that it had been so for centuries – because that same gentleman would find it straightforward to travel and stay there, and have something to eat, in short to find everything he needed *in situ*. But today? Apart from already being a considerable danger, travelling through the countryside in an automobile – exactly as in 1919 or 1920 there were those who had seen a windscreen smashed by a big millstone thrown by persons unknown from behind a hedge – what else might one expect to find there, with or without a double-barrelled shotgun slung

over his shoulder, except dark looks, backs stubbornly turned or even open and challenging sneers? The times of courteous smiles, of the doffing of hats, of respectful bows, were over. For everyone – the politically and the racially persecuted alike.

He thought, too, as for several months he had been unable not to, of the unpleasant occurrence that befell him, he of all people, last April at La Montina, that day he decided to go and see how the land-levelling works were proceeding.

What a brilliant idea! And, above all, what a glorious scene! He once again saw himself in the midst of endless fields, seated on the verge of a ditch, with some thirty field hands – familiar faces, for the most part, the majority of whom he'd known for years and years – who, ready to bring their raised hoes down on his skull, demanded the immediate revision of their sharecropping agreements. He'd had no option but to yield, and Galassi-Tarabini, his family solicitor, whom he had consulted as soon as he returned to town, had unconditionally approved of his 'tactic'. And yet, this was what had resulted from the advice that his lawyer had then dispensed: not to give the least regard to the promise he had given, but rather to report the threats of violence he'd suffered to the Codigoro *Carabinieri*: from that day on he had not dreamed of setting foot in La Montina again, so his manager and accountant, Prearo, needed to visit the farm on his own every now and then, in order to tally his accounts with Benazzi, the farm overseer. And because, since 1939, the entire inheritance of agricultural land and property of the deceased Leone Limentani was now in the name of his daughter-in-law, Nives, Nives Pimpinati, Catholic, Aryan and, at that time, eight months pregnant, his son, Edgardo, and his widow, Erminia Calabresi, his direct heirs, could now consider, definitively, the over four hundred hectares of the holding if not also the Ferrara house in Via Mentana, where for good or ill they still lived, the property of another person.

Apart from Galassi-Tarabini and his accountant, Prearo, he had never spoken to a soul about the incident at La Montina, neither to his mother nor to his wife. His mother, for sure – just a glance at her and you could see how unruffled she was – had heard nothing about it up until now. But Signora Nives? Could it be possible that she hadn't been informed of everything by Prearo, with whom he would so often see her confabulating in the office? Then, with respect to the farming community of Codigoro and its district, as far at least as Pomposa – and above all to the community of farm labourers – fat chance that they wouldn't have dinned the whole affair into the heads of all and sundry

at the local trade union council!

But precisely because of this, if that was how things were, what point would there be in risking worse, what the devil would make him take that chance? Was it worth provoking further trouble, perhaps even of a physical nature, for the simple desire to fire off some shots?

Which was more important, all things considered, the hunt or else …?

Abruptly he decided to wait no longer.

‘It’s all pointless, anyway,’ he grumbled morosely.

He lifted himself up, shifted to one side and stretched out over the bath to turn off the taps, and was standing upright once again.

In the meantime, the room had filled up with thick, tepid steam.

2

Standing motionless before the closed door, touching the latch without lowering it, he wondered if he might still manage to slope off unnoticed.

His mother and his wife had said goodbye to him the previous evening, when, soon after dinner, he'd left them in the dining-room to knit away in silence in front of the smoking coals of the fireplace. It was true: the previous evening he hadn't been able to say goodbye to Rory, his baby girl, since he'd come home from the Unione club at nine and by nine Rory would already have been asleep for a good hour. Yet now was certainly not the time to hesitate. If giving Rory a kiss meant he'd have to face an additional series of goodbyes from Nives, who occupied the double bedroom next to his own, opposite the baby's room (his mother's bedroom looked out at the front: far enough away and safely isolated, by the grace of God!), then, no thanks, he would willingly do without that kiss.

He opened the door slowly.

As soon as he was outside he switched on the light, turned to shut the door, then made a few tentative steps across the linoleum of the corridor. Although he was wearing short American military boots without nails in their soles, nevertheless, he put down his feet with extreme care. His usual weight was about eighty kilograms. But today, swathed as he was in his hunting clothes, and laden with the weight of two rifles, the Browning and his old Three Rings Krupp, today, without a doubt, he must have weighed another twenty kilos. The merest creak provoked by his hundred kilos from the parquet beneath the lino, and Nives, who had always been a light sleeper, would in all likelihood wake up and call him.

''Dgardo!'

'Ssh!' was his instinctive reply.

Who knows how, but Nives had managed to hear him. 'What a pain!' he grumbled. If he didn't immediately enter her room, she'd be sure to start yelling for him.

He poked his head into the utterly dark room.

‘Ssh! What’s wrong? Wait a second.’

It irked him to have to enter his wife’s bedroom with the rifles, the cartridge belt round his belly, and all his gear: the five-shot rifle in its conspicuous bag of *écru* leather, especially, which, despite every declared programme of tight economy, he had bought only last September at Gualandi’s, the foremost gunsmith in Bologna. Slowly then, taking pains with every movement, he offloaded the Browning, hanging it from its strap on the window-handle there at his side. He was about to do the same with the double-barrelled shotgun; but there’d be no harm showing that gun to Nives, he reflected. She had seen it in his hands even as far back as their time in Codigoro, when she was only his mistress, so that, most likely, she would hardly notice it now. It could also serve to avoid a scene of any kind – an *intention* of that sort wasn’t out of the question: she was more than capable of starting a quarrel at such a moment – by making it clear to her he was just about to leave, and hadn’t a minute to spare for a chat or anything else.

He entered the room.

Nives was switching on the bedside-table lamp. With his right-hand thumb hooked between the gun’s leather strap and the bristly tweed of his jacket, he moved towards the centre of the room. And so, approaching the double bed of carved pinkish wood, where he, the only son, had been conceived, and where from 1939 on he had slept so rarely with his wife, for the second time that morning he felt himself pervaded by a strange sense of absurdity. Once again, it was as if between himself and the things he saw around him a thin transparent layer of glass had been interposed. Everything, there, on the other side, and he, on this side, looking at them one by one in a state of wonder.

Nives yawned. She lazily lifted her naked arm and covered her mouth with the back of her hand. Half-buried beneath the waxy, fat flesh of her upturned hand, the little gold wedding ring was almost invisible.

‘What time is it?’

‘Twenty minutes to five,’ he replied, staring her in the face. ‘I have to get going.’

‘Christ almighty – it’ll be so cold! Is it really cold?’

‘No, not very. I think it’ll rain.’

‘Don’t forget to take your raincoat, ’Dgardo!’

‘I’ve already put it in the car.’

‘And the wellington boots?’

‘Likewise.’

While they spoke they were observing each other: he with his hands

on the bedstead, she stretched out, as always, on her side, the right-hand side of the bed. But what they said to each other was of no importance. It served, for her too, only to buy time. In the meantime she too was scrutinizing, studying, weighing things up.

'I really have no idea why anyone would want to go hunting in winter,' Nives continued. 'Especially between Christmas and New Year! See if you don't come home with pneumonia!'

'Why should that be? All I need to do is keep well wrapped up.'

'Have you at least put on the woollen suit?'

'Yes. Mamma took care to put it out on the clothes-horse.'

He hadn't planned to say that, he could swear to it. All the same, Nives grimaced.

'Since Mamma Erminia always wants to plan ahead for you –' she said, giving a series of curt nods of her head, which was full of curlers – 'it wouldn't be polite of me to get in her way.'

Luckily, she quickly changed her tone.

'How can anyone do that?' she continued, 'Staying out, soaked through, for five or six hours without a break? Good Lord, you could keep in mind that you're no longer a spring chicken! Just thinking about it, I get goosebumps. Brrrr.'

She laughed, narrowing her eyes. And he, at the end of the bed, while curiously observing their shape and every detail of that face, felt a sense of stupefaction growing within him. He was well aware how it could have come about that this little countrywoman aged between thirty and forty, with her small grey inexpressive eyes, her short, hooked nose like the beak of a raptor, and with that small mouth and its thin, almost invisible upper lip and fat prominent lower lip, had become his wife. Oh, how well he understood that! Yet, at the same time, watching her play the role of a lady from the most select urban society, who had never once set foot in the countryside, least of all that of the Bassa region, he couldn't believe it was true. Nives. That Nives. What was she called again, her surname? Ah yes: Pimpinati. Nives Pimpinati.

'What time will you be back this evening?'

'I'm not sure. After five.'

'Are you going to visit your cousin as well?'

There was nothing at all strange about her asking a question like that. It was no secret that after almost ten years he had finally decided to re-establish contact with Ulderico – only by telephone, it's true, and with the excuse of asking if he happened to be able to suggest someone to take him by boat through the valley marshes, but the ice had thus been

broken. And yet the question must have seemed to her in some way risky and indiscreet. She feigned indifference, but he knew her – though who knows what was going on inside her head now. Poor Ulderico. She was probably still unable to forgive him for doing everything in his power to persuade him *not* to marry her …

'I don't know,' he replied. 'It's possible.'

'And where will you go to eat?'

'I don't know. Perhaps in Caneviè … or maybe even in Codigoro, at the Bosco Elìceo restaurant. It's not as if there's a great deal of choice.'

Nives wrinkled her nose.

'So you'll go to that nice Fascist Bellagamba?' she exclaimed. 'To that thug of a *tupìn*? [fn1] Sorry, but rather than go there you'd do much better eating at our house in the country. You could get Benazzi's wife to make you something, a *pastasciutta*, a cut of meat … At the end of the day,' she went on, with a harder look in her eyes, and speaking now as if the whole thing concerned her, directly, personally, as though it concerned her more than it did him, 'at the end of the day the house at La Montina is still ours, if I'm not mistaken!'

What on earth was Nives getting at?

She smiled, tightening her lips.

'Well, it's up to you,' she continued. 'But you know what I'm thinking? It would be a pleasure to go there, to La Montina, once in a while, perhaps even to be taken there by someone. That's something I might enjoy! You may think everything's fine. But the effort to be polite, not to ruffle anyone's feelings, ends up, little by little, with *them* taking possession of it all, of the land. And nothing will stand in their way, just see if I'm wrong!'

This meant one of two things: either she didn't know what had happened to him last April at La Montina, and in that case by *them* – when she pronounced it, he noticed, her upper lip took on the shape of a circumflex – she meant to refer in general to the thousands of Pimpinatis, Benazzis, Callegaris, Callegarinis, Patrignanis, Tagliatis, etcetera who were in political 'agitation' in the whole Bassa region of the Ferrara countryside from the city gates to the sea, always after more and more from the landowners. Or she did know, and so was inviting him to speak about it, to open up, to confide in her.

This latter prospect suddenly filled him with a kind of fear. Confide in Nives! And tell her what, exactly?

'Listen to what Prearo told me yesterday evening,' Nives continued. 'He told me that …'

‘It’s not because of that,’ he interrupted her. ‘It’s so as not to have to drive another ten kilometres as well. And then, if it rains, there’s the risk of getting stuck in the mud.’

He moved back brusquely from the bed, and turned his back.

‘If you start back later than five o’clock –’ Nives shouted out behind him – ‘beware of the fog!’

He turned slightly, lifting a hand to stop her making a fuss.

‘Fine, yes, I understand.’

Although she was sleeping alone, she was well organized. On the bedside table, apart from an image of the Virgin Mary, Help of Christians, to whom the main church in Codigoro, the one in the square, was dedicated, she had also arranged the miniature radio, the basket with her sewing things, the photographs of her parents and a stack of papers. Why did they still live together? he wondered, as he left the room. Why didn’t they finally separate?

He paused in the corridor, in front of the Browning, once more unsure of what to do. He checked the time on his Vacheron-Constantin wristwatch – another keepsake from Switzerland. It said four fifty-eight. Late, he was late – he said to himself. Still … Suddenly deciding not to shoulder his second rifle, he drew a torch from his jacket pocket and walked towards the door of his daughter’s bedroom.

He turned off the corridor light, lit the torch, lowered the latch, and very slowly entered the room. To separate, yes! – he thought, advancing on tiptoe amid the faint smell of talc, school exercise books, chalk dust and floor wax which always wafted between those walls. To separate – it took nothing to say the words. But, in practice, how would they manage to accomplish such a thing? How much would it cost in lawyers’ fees? Not a little, that was for sure. And in that case, how would it be possible for him, the landowner of nothing, to gather together the needful? ‘At the end of the day, La Montina is still ours, if I’m not mistaken,’ Nives had said just a moment ago, laying the stress on ‘ours’ and ‘mistaken’. Truly, she couldn’t have found a turn of phrase that was more effective in reminding him how things actually stood.

But aside from that, what about Rory?

Having drawn up to her little bed, he halted. Almost holding his breath as he felt his heartbeat throbbing darkly in his throat, he directed the beam of light first at the tiny Christmas tree placed in a pot at the bedside, and then at the small body stretched out under the fluffy pink angora-wool blanket – beginning with the slight swelling of her feet and ascending as far as her shoulders and the lower part of her cheek. And

while he stood contemplating Rory, astonished as ever at how beautiful, how lively, how strong she was (her face perhaps somewhat resembled his own, especially the eyes, which, however, were bigger than his – they were huge! – and in the shape of the lips) he was suddenly overwhelmed by an inexpressible anxiety, by a sense of inconsolable desolation. He did not know why. It was as though, silently and without warning, it had leapt upon him. As though he had been attacked by a wild beast.

He leaned down to brush his lips against the little girl's forehead, retraced his steps across the room, and went out a third time into the corridor. He turned on the light switch and looked at the time. It was five minutes past five. He went back to pick up the rifle hanging on the window-handle, slung it over his left shoulder, and went on his way. And soon after, with the sensation of falling into a well, slowly, and without any sign of haste, he descended the dark spiral staircase which led down to the entrance.

3

At the doorway it was very cold: a damp, insidious cold which could really have been that of a well, of an underground cellar. In sudden gusts, through the street door, which Romeo for some reason had left wide open, the wind made the little blackened-ironwork lamp sway perilously where it hung from the coffers of the dark ceiling.

The caretaker was standing still down there, at the threshold, intently staring out towards the invisible façade of the house across the way. What was he doing looking out there? With his slightly hunched shoulders like those of a worker on strike, stubbornly turned away, he not only seemed unaware of his presence, but also to have forgotten that before leaving he still needed to have his coffee, and besides that, always, especially in winter, the motor was meant to be warmed up slowly, without any hurry.

The melancholy, familiar, faithful shape of his dark-blue Lancia Aprilia waited outside the door with its fenders pointed towards the gate that opened on to the courtyard and that had remained half-shut. He went round the car, placed the rifles on the chest stood up against the wall opposite the staircase, retraced his steps, opened the car's right-hand-side door and sat behind the steering wheel. While he fumbled with the starting key – the motor seemed loath to start up; doubtless, due to the cold, but also, due to the battery, as ancient as the rest of the vehicle – he didn't detach his gaze from the motionless shape of Romeo reflected in the rear-view mirror. For the almost thirty years he'd helped with these early-morning departures for the country, never, he said to himself, had he behaved like this. Was he, perhaps, now, for the first time, suddenly irritated to have had to get up before dawn and on a Sunday too? Was that what he wanted to convey? Given the times, everything was possible. However it was, here was another novelty, and not in the least a pleasant one.

After a series of coughs, the motor finally came to life. With an effort, thanks to the cartridge belt wound round his waist, he leaned forwards to find the choke under the dashboard. When he sat back up again he

was surprised to find himself face to face with Romeo. He was standing there beside the car door, slightly stooping, looking down at him from under his heavy, tortoise-like eyelids.

'Will you be wanting your coffee?' he asked slowly in dialect.

He knew the caretaker's character inside out – brusque, sometimes surly, but still affectionate, and unfailingly faithful. And so – as he told himself, and his breast expanded with relief – not only did Romeo not harbour the least rancour towards him, but, on the contrary, from the vague hint of jokiness hovering around his prominent cheekbones, one could guess that he was content, privately delighted and gratified to see him after so many years once again going off on a duck shoot.

He got out of the car.

'Is it ready?'

Romeo nodded. Then, pointing with his chin towards the two rifles, he asked if he should pack them in the boot.

'If you give us the keys,' he said in dialect, 'I'll put everything in.'

'No, it's not necessary,' he replied, trying to maintain the usual tone, between benevolent and self-composed, which typified their relations. 'It's better if you put them on the back seat. And this as well, if you don't mind.'

He took off the cartridge belt and laid it on the caretaker's outstretched arm, after which he went with rapid steps towards the lit-up entrance of the Manzolis' home.

The apartment where they lived comprised three interconnecting rooms, one after the other. On one side the kitchen, which overlooked the courtyard; on the opposite side the bedroom, with its window on to Via Mentana; in between, a huge room which, since their daughter Irma had gone to live with her husband, the two old folk had piled up with rows of polished furniture, but which in practice they never occupied. As always happened (since that event last April in Montina), and now, once again, stepping into the caretakers' flat – and especially into their kitchen, which was so pretty and neat, so well lit and above all so well heated by the glowing plates of the cheap stove – suddenly lifted his morale. That was it – he exclaimed to himself once again – here he felt at ease, truly and completely, as if at home! The Manzolis were utterly dependable!

He sat at the table and began to take slow sips of boiling coffee from the bowl without a handle that was kept for his use – his own *mastèla dal caffè*, his coffee bucket – as Romeo called it in dialect. Meanwhile, Imelda, her sharp features hidden behind the black kerchief of a local

peasant woman, moved busily about.

He stared at her over the curved rim of the cup, intently following her every move.

Neither she nor Romeo could stand Nives. More or less openly, they showed their disapproval of everything to do with her, and extended their disapproval to include Prearo, the accountant, as well as the cook, Elsa, and even Rory – in short, every new person or thing that had made an appearance at no. 2 Via Mentana since 1938. Whenever they spoke to him about her, they never used her name. Unfailingly they called her '*your* Signora', the only true ladies of the house being 'Signora Erminia', and Lilla, the three-year-old poodle who was his mother's tender companion, and was even allowed in her bed, her only true child to cuddle and spoil in every possible way. They had nothing in the least bit good to say about Nives, ever. He only needed to enter their house for a moment and one or other of them would start up their usual litany of complaints.

Recently, for example, they had begun to refer to Nives' habit, when he was away from home, of not using the entry-phone. For their slightest need, both she and Elsa preferred to lean out of the window, and shout down to them, to yell so loud that the like of it was never heard, not even in the big apartments of Via Mortara … And now – he wondered, lowering his eyes, as if by doing so it would be easier to draw on the infinite reserves of patience he needed to have at his disposal – what further offence committed by his wife would he have to hear about? Imelda was certainly brooding about something.

He raised his eyelids again.

'What's wrong?'

Once again, he was mistaken. Imelda had reddened eyes, continually raising her handkerchief to her nose, but she wasn't thinking about Nives at all. As soon as Romeo had come to the door, she began to inveigh against William, 'that scrounging Commie William' as she put it in dialect. Although he had all his electrician's diplomas – she was loudly complaining – William refused to work, spent all his money at the brothel, so that they, poor and old as they were, had to carry him and his wife, both, on their shoulders.

He turned towards Romeo.

'Who is this William?' he asked.

'Irma's husband,' Romeo replied drily in dialect, bending his silver head under the light.

For a moment he didn't understand – as though, to protect his inner

calm, his memory had stopped working.

But then he quickly remembered.

Of course – he reflected – the husband of Irma, their daughter. How had he forgotten about him?

He was a young man of about twenty-five – he recalled – scrawny, straw-blond, with a fluent patter, well mannered, someone who, up until recently, he'd often enough seen hanging about the entrance and the courtyard, and who had once not only offered to wash his car but, having done so, had refused any payment. A Communist? He could easily have been: it was enough to look at his thin, pale, avid face eaten up from within by who could guess what secret rage, enough to listen to his Italian that sounded like that of a radio announcer, so smooth and detached, it was true, but also so suspicious and unreliable. It was a source of wonder that Irma, such a meek girl, very refined and well brought up, raised by the nuns in the sewing school on Via Borgo di Sotto, and ready to blush all over if anyone so much as met her in the street or greeted her, let alone talked to her, should have let herself fall for a person like that.

Now Irma was six months pregnant – Imelda was explaining to him. And so she, working from morning till night like a 'skivvy', then had to fork out for the extravagance of that good-for-nothing husband.

He felt a growing unease, and yet he stayed there. He still couldn't make up his mind to leave. He looked at the time: five thirty-five. On the telephone, Ulderico had been very precise about the time. The man he'd hired who was to ferry them from Lungari di Rottagrande to the hunting hide – a man called Gavino, if he'd heard correctly – would be waiting for them at Volano, in front of the big Tuffanelli house, from a quarter past six. It was now five thirty-five. He had to be there at a quarter past six. The meeting with Gavino wasn't going to work. He'd be there at the earliest by six thirty, or even a quarter to seven. And that was without taking into account that, to the best of his recollection, from the Tuffanelli house to Lungari di Rottagrande they would have to travel around more than a third of the perimeter of Valle Nuova and so that would mean a good half hour to add on before they arrived. So if everything were to go smoothly, he'd be able to hunker down in the hide no earlier than a quarter past or half past seven when it was already fully light. And that was only if he didn't hang around another minute and left at once.

He looked at his watch, trying to hurry himself up, to find the necessary energy to get to his feet. Useless. A vast inertia, stronger than

any exertion of his will, held him to the woven wicker seat in the Manzolis' kitchen, as though he were tied down. Oh, if only, despite everything, he could just stay there, in the warmth of the caretakers' flat, hidden from his family and from everyone else until the evening! He would have given anything for that.

He raised his eyes to Imelda.

'But why on earth,' he asked, 'would your son-in-law not want to work?'

Shrugging her thin shoulders, Imelda replied that she didn't know. 'Beats me,' she said in dialect. She knew only one thing – she went on – that her son-in-law stayed in bed all day and if she, Irma, ever tried to reproach him, 'to tell him off', that Communist delinquent was quite prepared to give her a clout.

It was true. That was guaranteed by Romeo's face, suffused with a barely contained rancour, and even more so by her face, with its eyes that spoke of fated, perhaps even willing, victimhood.

Bewildered, he made as if to get up.

'If he doesn't work,' he tried to object, 'perhaps it's because he can't find any.'

Romeo intervened.

'Not a chance!' he said in dialect, lowering his head. 'Doing nothing's the only thing he'd dream of doing.'

'But then why –' he persisted, turning to the question of Irma once again – 'don't you get her, your daughter, to come back to live with you?'

The woman sighed. She'd suggested that to her umpteen times she said. But Irma was stubborn as a mule. She didn't want her mother even to talk of it.

'She's in love,' she summed it up, twisting her thin lips into a grimace full of scorn.

Certainly she was in love, as he had anyway already understood. And now even the Manzolis' kitchen had become uninhabitable – this too, a place one had to vacate. And quickly.

In the silence that followed Imelda's final words – while only the muffled grumbling of the Aprilia's motor idling at the gate reached him through the walls – he looked at his watch once again. Five fifty-two.

'Well, I'd best get moving,' he announced.

He grasped the edge of the table with both hands, stood up, and made his way out. And to Imelda, who scurried after him begging him to do something for Irma – if he were to speak to her son-in-law, she said,

perhaps that ‘scoundrel’ would finally make up his mind to turn over a new leaf – he replied with a ‘We’ll see’, which he, more than anyone, knew meant nothing at all.

Go and speak to a fellow like that? he thought to himself while he went through the door and walked towards the car. Speak to *him*? Imagining the talk he would have with the young electrician with his cadaverous face, he felt invaded by a kind of disgust. A disgust mingled with fear.

He got into his car. He turned on the headlights. Finally, he replied with a wave to Romeo’s deferential salute as he slowly negotiated the reverse manoeuvre which brought him out on to the street, and there, halted at the edge of the pavement, looked back at the caretaker, who was standing in silence with the faint light from the doorway at his back, as he shifted into first and drove away.

4

All he wanted now was to be there in Codigoro.

For a good part of the journey, from the Prospettiva Arch right up to the outskirts of Codigoro, he had driven with his eyes fixed only on the road. The ferryman would be waiting at Volano, so he had to hurry. But besides that, only after Codigoro, after Pomposa, when he saw in the uncertain light of dawn the low, deserted landscape broken by stretches of apparently stagnant water – which were actually in flux, joined as they were to the open sea – only then did he begin to relax, to breathe easily.

And yet, just at the outskirts of Codigoro, a hundred metres before turning on to the smoothly asphalted ring road, an acute spasm of pain at the level of his belt, heralded a moment earlier by a faint heart tremor, forced him to bend forwards over the steering wheel.

'Just as well that we're here,' he grumbled, glancing up through the windscreen at the two looming chimneys, the one of the Eridania sugar factory and the other of the water pump of the Land Reclamation Company.

He was well attuned to his own habits. He could hold off for a maximum of ten minutes. Would that be enough?

He made use of the first, rare, municipal street-lights, madly swinging above the rough cobbles of the country road, to look at his watch. Six forty. At that time the two cafes on the square would already have drawn up their blinds. Best, then, to give up his plan to drive on to Volano and stop at Codigoro instead. If he could get as far as the square, he'd be safe and sound.

Turning right, he soon reached the town centre, and drove into the square. No lights at all – he immediately noticed, annoyed, and yet, absurdly, with a sense of relief – neither from the two cafes, the one opposite the other, nor from the ten-storey building of the I.N.A.[fn1], there in front, where Ulderico and his family lived, nor from the other houses in the vicinity, large and small. Everything was closed up. All dark, with not a soul to be seen.

He parked his car on the left, beside the big, *Novecento* ex-Fascist headquarters, now become a *Carabinieri* barracks. He switched off the headlights, then the motor, got out and calmly locked the car door. Codigoro. Codigoro's main square. It had been some ten years since he'd been there at such an early hour. And yet he couldn't recall ever seeing it so deserted. What had happened to make it so? Was it because of – he grinned – 'the Communist terror'? Or simply Christmas time?

It wasn't cold and, here at least, there was hardly any wind. Strange, even his stomach was no longer bothering him. A dog left the shadows of the entrance at the base of the I.N.A. building, a setter, to guess from its stride. He saw it move into clear view towards the centre of the square – it *was* an old setter, in fact – and come to a halt at the statue for the Fallen of the First World War. It sniffed studiously at the figure's boot and urinated on it, then, at the same trot, disappeared down an alley to the left. And if he should try calling round at Bellagamba's, he wondered, once again alone. True, it might be that not even the Bosco Elìceo would be open. At worst, though, given that it was also a hotel – he had never slept there himself but he'd often heard it said that there were bedrooms upstairs – he could always ring the bell.

He opened the boot and took out a grey, Russian-style Astrakhan cap, an old schmutter that had served him since he was a youngster both for hunting in the valleys and for skiing in the mountains. He put it on. Then, some twenty metres from his car, he came to the corner of the ex-Fascist headquarters' façade and the adjoining street. He narrowed his eyes and scanned the street. He wasn't mistaken. Even the Bosco Elìceo was shut. So he really would have to use the bell. As there was no doubt about it, a stop was called for. He had no choice.

Regardless of this, when he came up to the lowered blinds, with the neon sign sizzling above his head, the sudden prospect of finding himself in a face-to-face conversation with Bellagamba, who might very well be the one who opened the door, was enough to hold him back.

He remembered Bellagamba in '38, in '39, in his Corporal's militia uniform – he was called Gino, if he wasn't mistaken, Gino Bellagamba – with his fez tilted back on his shaved neck and with the black tassel swinging halfway down his bullish back. He remembered his gritty aspect in those days, his air of a country bully-boy reinstated into active service because of the requirements of the time, his almost perpetual presence in the square in front of the Fascist headquarters, the threatening and scornful looks that he'd had to put up with as a 'Jew', as an 'apolitical' and as a landowner, every time that, returning to

Codigoro en route to La Montina, he'd had the misfortune to come within range … No. To find himself in front of that ugly mug, with whom, apart from all the rest of it, he'd never exchanged a single word in his whole life, to have to ask him for what he would have to, permission to use the toilet, all this would be far from pleasant, that was for sure. If only he had got there a little later, he would almost have preferred to turn on his heels and go and ring the doorbell at the Cavaglieris' house.

But what could he expect to find there? Besides, why go to all that bother? He had always got out of accepting the Fascist membership card, not because he was especially *anti*, if truth be told, but just from that unsociable side of his character – and in this respect his behaviour was different from that of Ulderico, who, for his part, when they had offered him the card in 1932, had pocketed it straightaway. But, when all was said and done, were the Fascists before 1943 that much worse than the Communists of today? And the present trade union councils, enforcers of policies to the detriment of those who owned land, were they really any worse than the Fascist headquarters or the local Fascist groups of those days? As regards Bellagamba, perhaps it was true, as Nives claimed, that after the Badoglio period he had joined up with the forces at Salò. Very likely. In any case, if even the Communists, who were the absolute masters in Codigoro today, left him alone to make a good living, why should he, of all people, kick up a fuss about him? Besides, it was well known that Nives had it in for her townsfolk. She never missed a chance.

While he stood there, uneasy about the fate of the two rifles left in evidence on the back seat of the car as well – perhaps it would be better to turn back at once and hide them in the boot along with the cartridge belt – he seemed to hear noises filtering out from inside the locale. They were murmurs, sighs, tremors, creaks – as though made by someone effortfully shifting furniture about.

He waited a while in silence, then knocked with his knuckles on the corrugated-iron sheet.

He was assailed by a voice that was violent, irate and, at the same time, frightened.

'Who is it?'

'A friend,' he answered quietly.

'A friend who?'

He hesitated. He heard heavy steps from inside approaching, then coming to a halt.

‘Limentani,’ he said.

‘Who?’

‘Li-men-ta-ni,’ he repeated without raising his voice, suddenly marvelling at his own surname, at the way the syllables of his own name resounded in the open air.

With a single tug, the blinds were completely raised.

It was indeed him, Bellagamba – he saw – even bigger, fatter and more bullish than before, with his chest under the leather jacket shaped like a woman’s. And seized once more with his old repugnance, he was on the point of turning his back and leaving. Perhaps he was still in time.

But he was too late. Bellagamba, who was already opening his blue eyes wide, had recognized him.

‘What a treat!’ he was saying under his breath.

He smiled gleefully, showing the small compact teeth of a boxer.

‘You’ve no idea what a fright you gave me, Signor Avvocato,’ he went on, still in a whisper, and then as he moved aside he winked at him conspiratorially. ‘Come in, please. It’s cold out there. Do come in!’

He would have expected anything but such a cordial, such a talkative, welcome – strange how Bellagamba too, like that William, the husband of Irma Manzoli, spoke an unusually fluent, easy, refined Italian. He would almost have preferred a rougher, more hostile reception, so that he could assume the role of the courteous and absent-minded gentleman. What did this conspiratorial behaviour of Bellagamba mean? Once he was taken into the man’s den, was he planning to force him, in his presence, to mourn the loss of the golden times of the Fascist era, or even those of the Salò Republic? Bellagamba, like everyone else at Codigoro, must have known every detail of what had happened to him last April in La Montina. But if he was now expecting to hear complaints and confidences from him, he was greatly mistaken. He held no grudge against anyone in the world and against Bellagamba least of all. And yet, let’s be clear, neither did he have any personal ties to him.

In the meantime he’d entered with the impression, intensified also by the strong stench of fried fish which took him by the throat as soon as he crossed the threshold, of venturing into a cave, into the den of a wild animal. He took off his fur cap and looked around. He found himself in a medium-sized hallway, immersed in an almost complete darkness. On the opposite side from the entrance, on top of a small isolated desk, a table lamp capped with a lampshade of green silk spilled a faint yellowish glow.

He quickly realized that the desk was nothing other than a brand-new hotel reception desk. Behind it, on numbered hooks fixed in a double row to a wall of lime-washed plaster, hung ten or twelve keys. In the semi-dark he could make out nothing else. But that was enough. The desk and those keys were enough to make him aware how little the present locale, transformed by the ex-Corporal of the militia into a hotel and restaurant, shared with the unpretentious country eating-house as he remembered it from years ago.

Bellagamba had remained behind him. He heard him muttering, swearing between his teeth at the blinds that refused to shut again. Every now and then he advised him to take care. On the floor there was a half-torn-open package with something heavy inside – a steelyard which had arrived the evening before by post from Milan. He might trip up and do himself an injury.

At last Bellagamba drew closer, and as he brushed past, wafting the smell of his armpits, he lightly bumped against his shoulder. He made his way towards the desk and turned a switch mounted beside the keys. Finally, in the vague blaze of a fat neon tube that ran crossways along the ceiling they sat facing each other: he occupying a small leather armchair and Bellagamba there behind the desk, his wide jaw divided in two by the yellow light of the table lamp.

With an even stronger sense than before of being outside the world, he didn't know how to begin. It wasn't even thinkable to ask for something to eat. He felt his stomach was clenched like a fist.

Bellagamba came to his aid.

'But what,' he enquired in an insinuating tone, suddenly switching to dialect and narrowing his bright, watery eyes, 'but what, pardon me, brings you here? Have you maybe come to Codigoro to hunt?'

Given the way he was dressed, the question was essentially superfluous. But the way it had been posed in that insinuating yet at the same time humble tone – very much that with which a farmworker on his own lands might have addressed him before 1938 – was enough to reassure him of his basic safety.

He nodded.

Yes, he then said. He'd come here exactly for that – to fire off a few shots.

He lifted the hem of his sleeve and glanced at his wristwatch.

Though would he be in time to do that? he wondered and all at once really doubted it. He was too late. He should have reached Volano some time ago – at a quarter past six. While now it was already past seven.

At last he made up his mind.
He got to his feet and looked around.
‘Would you mind me using your toilet for a moment?’ he asked.

5

The staircase was in front of him, straight and steep.

He went up slowly, step by step, holding on to the smooth wooden banister and staring up at the landing, watching it gradually draw near. Up there, the sky appeared through a kind of open round window in the opposite wall. The sky was dark, crossed by rapid swollen clouds. Dawn was breaking.

Once he had set foot on the landing, he stopped for a moment to get his breath back. To the left and to the right, two short, ill-lit corridors led away. All the doors to the rooms were shut. On the floor outside one of them, the last on the right-hand corridor, a solitary pair of man's shoes had been set out.

Bellagamba had really put the boat out, he thought, looking at those shoes. He'd spared no expense. But why be surprised at that? There was a fair amount of cash in circulation, more than a fair amount. For everyone. The only ones to be denied, always excluded from the tide of bank loans, were those few old-style agricultural landowners who still existed, and remained attached tooth and nail, some for one reason, some for another, to the usual corn, the usual hemp, the usual beetroots, and therefore, Communism or no Communism, destined in the near future to disappear, to be swept away. Fair enough, it's true – someone else in his place would have paid heed to Nives and Prearo, the accountant, who for quite a while hadn't missed a chance to make him understand that enough was enough, it was time to quit, and once and for all he should decide to be rid of the old traditional crops which had become disastrously unproductive, and turn his estate, as so many others had, into an exclusively fruit-growing enterprise. Someone else in his shoes, not caring a jot for the Communist threats, would have presented himself one fine day at La Montina with a goodly escort of *Carabinieri* and have sacked the lot of them, starting with that equivocating overseer Benazzi and ending up with the last of the hired hands and cowherds. Someone other than him. Because it wouldn't be him. He agreed with the banks, the Agricultural Bank of Ferrara included, who

were ready to give financial support to anyone at all, even to a Bellagamba, but not to certain 'hangovers from the past', a phrase which could be read in even the most official newspapers, such as the *Giornale dell'Emilia*. It was enough for him to think of himself as a farmer to immediately renounce any such project and to view himself as a relic.

In the meantime, he had climbed a second staircase. Broken by a small, mezzanine landing, this one was less arduous than the one before. He began climbing a third, which was once again steep. At last, without once detaching his gaze from another port window, identical to the first, he reached the summit of the top floor.

Here, too, were the same empty corridors in semi-darkness, the same closed doors. Slightly to the right of the stairwell he recognized the door he was seeking at once. A little earlier Bellagamba had been explicit. 'You'll see it's even written on it,' he had specified, with every precaution, as though hoping to cut a good figure, directing him to the only toilet in the hotel he considered befitting such an honourable guest, rather than to the 'water closet' of the ground floor. It was indeed as he'd said. The straw-coloured door sported an enamelled metal plate three-quarters of the way up on which could be read BATHROOM. It seemed to him like a miniature road sign. The kind that were usual before the First World War, but were now rarer than white flies. The colour of the elongated, upright capital letters was the same blackish-blue as the thin border.

He went in.

Even before he had turned on the light, he noticed that the bathroom did indeed contain a bath. Apart from the lavatory, the room had a rectangular cast-iron tub, a basin with a mirror above it and a bidet with two taps.

The lavatory was on the other side of the bath, next to the window. He approached it and examined the seat of blondish wood which had retained some flecks of white paint. He lifted it with his foot. Taking off his jacket and cap, which he hung on the window catch, he unbuttoned his trousers and the two pairs of underpants, lowered them and sat down directly on to the freezing porcelain.

But nothing. Once again nothing. His bowels showed no inclination to empty themselves. Regardless of every effort, he felt that not even now would he succeed, and if he did, any result would be infinitesimal.

On the low windowsill, a metre or so from his forearm, there was some newspaper – a small pile of square sheets all cut to the same measure that a dark, porous sea pebble kept orderly and secure. He

stretched out his hand and drew out from under the stone the first sheet on the pile. It must have come from a newspaper published some months earlier, he thought, reckoning by the yellow hue of the paper – perhaps an old number of the *Giornale dell'Emilia*. SPERI IN NEW YORK declared a caption in big letters. And so – he tried to remember – when was it that De Gasperi had gone to America to discuss things with Truman and Marshall? In April? May? Or earlier? That visit must have been before then! The Communists had been dismissed from the government *after* the crisis last May. And the crisis, the last of a series, had broken out – this he remembered exactly – when De Gasperi had already been back in Italy for a good while. So was it in January then? Or February?

He picked up some other sheets at random, none of which he could establish the provenance of, but not all of them had been cut from the same newspaper or even on the same day. RIGHT TO STRIK – ELEGATION OF THE COAS declared another headline in even bigger letters than the previous one. And another: ENNI and TOGLIATTI – ATTACK THE GOVERNM. And yet another: EDDING OF JEWISH BLOOD IN TODAY'S POLAND.

He tried to read a passage of the two-column article that followed.

It was a report from Cracow. If the reporter was to be believed, in Poland under the Communists in 1949 the persecution of the Jews was proceeding no less bloodily and cruelly than under Gauleiter Frank, Hitler's trusted henchman in Polish affairs. Was that possible? The tone of the article seemed to him excessively strident. The writer was surely exaggerating. And yet there must be some truth in it. Heavens – he grinned – surely, it couldn't all be nonsense!

He raised his head, and to distract himself, looked out of the window. Dark but clear, it was now full daylight. No mist, no fog. Under the window, adjacent to the earthen courtyard where Bellagamba kept his hens, he saw a wretched, overgrown football pitch stretch out in a vertical perspective, with the islanded goalposts at either end. Even from a distance, he seemed able to perceive all their grey, frail, woodwormy decrepitude. Beyond the sports field, more or less the whole village – its dark roof-tiles, so different from the roof-tiles of Ferrara (thicker, more irregular, as though they had been hand-made one by one) and yet seen together, so similar, so obviously of the same breed. And out there, the square, the Church of Santa Maria Ausiliatrice on one side, on the other the red façade of the Trade Union hall between the now lit-up windows of the two cafes, and in the middle, as though in the same line of vision, much higher than the roofs of the modest little houses that flanked

them, the two massive structures of the ex-Fascist HQ and the I.N.A. building facing each other. And then, further out, the curve of the river port, hidden by the two banks, but easily surmised from the looming masts of the big cargo ships at the end of the docks. And finally, further still, much further away, along the asphalted ribbon of the main road to Ferrara, high against the row of frozen poplars this side of the Volano stretch of the River Po, the northern edge of La Montina, the thin, smoke-darkened chimneys of the Eridania sugar refinery and, lower down, the single chimney of the Land Reclamation Company's water pump … Like a land surveyor deprived of his essential equipment, he tried to measure the distances and proportions by eye. How far off, in a straight line – he wondered, but casually, without any real attempt to deduce it – was the square by the river port? And that group of chimneys, down there to the right, how far was it from them to the half-ruined, brown, Gallo watchtower, tiny in the midst of the bare fields of La Montina, just slightly more visible than the farmhands' dwellings scattered at wide intervals around the property?

However hard he tried, he couldn't see the little villa – sold at the time of the Racial Laws – where he had installed Nives in 1930 and of which, for years, he had been the owner. No, that he couldn't make out. Isolated, at that time, on the southern reaches of the village, today it was impossible to distinguish it from the countless other houses put up in that area since, and all of them more or less of the same type. But that didn't matter. How many hundreds of metres separated that quarter, the most modern part of Codigoro, from the central square? And the ash-coloured statue of the infantryman, which, atop the monument for the Fallen in the main square, was throwing himself into the attack waving the torn and bullet-riddled regimental flag, was it bigger or smaller than life-size?

The direction of his thoughts changed again.

He now thought about Ulderico, his cousin and friend, his great friend, the inseparable companion of the first two-thirds of his life at least, who, for something like fifteen years, after having rented out the building in Via Montebello, Ferrara, to the Land Reclamation Company, had come to live in Codigoro, within walking distance of his estates, not even in a lovely villa surrounded by a park, but in a nondescript apartment, big, comfortable, but nondescript, right in the centre of the town. And thinking of Ulderico, and of himself, and of their lives, so similar and so different, he decided that sometime late that afternoon, if he didn't feel too tired and had a brace of wild fowl to bring as a gift –

with the dark and the mist the chance of being spotted and of having an unpleasant encounter in the street was almost zero – he would certainly go and pay a visit to the Cavaglieris: Ulderico, his wife, Cesarina, and all their kids. It was true that he hadn't visited them once, neither before the war, nor during, nor, for that matter, in these last three years following his return from Switzerland, and that he hadn't set eyes on even one of their six children – six! But after the two telephone calls he and Ulderico had exchanged last week, after all his cousin's unstinting kindnesses to him, not least of which had been not to appear in the least surprised to hear his voice after so long, what point would there be on either of their parts to persist in not seeing each other? How strange life is! He remembered the huge scandal of 1932, within the family and beyond, when Ulderico had decided, point-blank, to marry, in church, the trouser-maker of Codigoro, with whom for ages he had he had been carrying on a more or less public relationship – what the hell kind of surname did she have? – and, on top of that, on the very day of their marriage, to get himself baptized. And he remembered, still thinking about Ulderico, the insistence, the unexpected and unbearable interference, the absurd doggedness with which, ironically, his cousin had tried to make him give up on the idea of marrying, in his turn, his own mistress, Nives …

No, no – he came to a conclusion. To continue not seeing each other, to persist in maintaining a distance as if they had something to fear from one another, would be utterly meaningless.

6

Later, when he had come down again, Bellagamba was not to be found. What a trial it would have been to have to take his leave of the militia's ex-corporal, what a pain. All he wanted to do now was to be off, to distance himself from Codigoro as quickly as possible.

But no sooner had he left and come to the square than he saw Bellagamba himself standing on the edge of the same pavement, from which he once used to cast inquisitorial and threatening looks at everyone, townsfolk and outsiders alike. Standing beside the old Aprilia, with a foot resting on one of the front tyres, he had the air of an expert weighing up the condition of the fore-carriage. He realized that it wouldn't be possible to dodge him and that he'd have to put up with wasting even more time.

Approaching, he observed him. There was something almost unrecognizable about him. Over a high-necked, iron-grey sweater like a cyclist's, he wore a dark, double-breasted coat and, on his head, a soft hat with a lowered rim of the same tone. Completely inoffensive, and even as camouflaged and out-of-place as he, too, felt himself to be, Bellagamba looked quite like Mussolini in his last years, when the Germans took him away in a Storch single-engine aircraft from his Gran Sasso refuge …

'Hello,' he said.

'This yours?' the other asked, in dialect, barely giving him a glance, signalling towards the car.

He nodded. He came up beside him and looked out in front of him him. It was eight o'clock. The square was filling up. And while Bellagamba spoke to him about the Aprilia, fulsomely praising the 'brand and model' and, it seemed, offering to buy it off him – he'd been looking for a car of this type for some time, he said, robust, as well as cheap to run, and preferably one that had had few owners, better still, just one, to customize it into a small van, given the growing demands of the restaurant – he couldn't take his eyes off the throng, which, gathering in groups, grew ever bigger, minute by minute, there in front

of the low red-brick building of the Trade Union hall opposite. Others, women, girls, mainly very young girls, were being continually swallowed up by the big, dark, central entrance to the Church of Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, set alone in a space behind and to the left, at the end of the churchyard which was vast as a private square of its own. No one showed any sign of noticing the two of them. Everyone seemed busy with other concerns. With what, though? he wondered, feeling reassured, but at the same time strangely unhappy, disappointed. From the top of the belltower which rose slender and pointed at the rear of the church, so tall that on some days of fine weather, coming from Ferrara, one could begin to make it out at least twenty kilometres away, the solemn tones of the great bell were ceaselessly calling the people to Mass.

The bell was tolling. Some moments before, Bellagamba had stopped talking.

Now it was his turn.

'OK. I'll think about it,' he murmured, his gaze still fixed on the belltower. 'Perhaps we can discuss it later today.'

'You'll be coming for lunch?'

A little earlier, at the entrance of Bosco Elìceo, where he had left Bellagamba, there was seated a fellow of about seventy, thin, with a grey mop of hair, the pallid, gaunt face of a malaria victim, wearing a filthy, worn-out striped jacket. Not in the least fazed to see him descending from the upper floors, he had informed him at once that 'Signor Gino' had left less than a quarter of an hour before, but without saying where he was going or when he'd return. 'Well, would you say goodbye to him for me?' he said to the old man as he made his way out. 'Give him my thanks, and tell him I may be coming back for lunch.'

For lunch? he now thought. He had indeed spoken of lunch. But what if instead, abandoning all his plans, he were to return immediately to the city?

In any case, he didn't reply. He shifted his gaze from the belfry immediately below the very tall spire, and looked up at the sky. There were no longer any swollen, swift, low-altitude clouds coursing over the village roofs but a uniform grey, compact mantle. And if he really were to return home?

He turned to Bellagamba.

The latter smiled at him with his usual ambiguous, sly and vaguely sleepy expression.

'And would you care for a coffee?' he heard him propose in dialect.

He was being treated, he thought, with the same intimate, circumspect patience as Romeo employed. But in neither case was it to make fun of him, or with any obscure intent to provoke him, to test him out. Quite the reverse. If he hadn't misjudged it, he was only trying to reassure him, to make it clear that there was quite simply no need to keep on being disturbed by what were no more than shadows. To suggest to him, as a friend, not to have any unnecessary qualms, worries or fears.

'Where?' he asked.

'Over there. At Fetman's.'

With his big chin propped up by the high collar of his sweater, he nodded towards the cafe on the left side of the square.

'They serve much better coffee there than at Moccia's,' he went on, signalling once again with his chin, towards the right at the square's other cafe. 'And also,' he added, with a wink, 'at this time of the day, I can assure you that you'll not encounter any unpleasant faces at Fetman's.' Then he added in dialect, 'On that, I give you my word.'

As the two locales in the square at Codigoro had been from time immemorial the designated meeting places not only for the various political factions but also for all the dealers of the region, he had always avoided frequenting them – both out of instinct and from principle. Fetman's – what a name for a bar! Before the war it had a completely different kind of name … He'd not set foot in there even once. And yet why not? Even now, in '47, with the Reds in full spate, to go in at such an early hour the chance of coming up against some ugly, hostile mug would have been roughly the same as before, in other words, pretty slim. And then if, having taken his coffee, he really *should* decide to return to Ferrara – in which case he'd have to give up the idea of paying a late-afternoon visit to the Cavaglieris – what more convenient spot could there be than that for him to telephone Ulderico from? If he wanted to simply greet him and nothing more, holding out the possibility of another trip to Codigoro in the near future, especially to see him, then he would have to do it soon, before he left.

'Why not?' he replied. 'Let's go.'

They crossed the square side by side like two old friends – with the constant impression in his mind that everyone was ignoring them, and, exactly as happens between friends, without exchanging a single word.

They then stood at the bar waiting to be served. During the wait – at Fetman's there was hardly anyone; a few anonymous, taciturn regulars seated at small tables at the end of the big rectangular room that looked

more like a garage than a cafe; a smoky atmosphere impregnated with the smells of espressos, grappa, Tuscan cigars; he could feel his cheeks gradually becoming warm – his attention was once again directed to the I.N.A. building. Staring at it through the misted-up windowpanes, the construction seemed to him like a vague kind of grey-pink outcrop, like something threatening and impervious. It really was an impressive edifice – he thought to himself – as impressive as it was disproportionate. This explained why the street of which it formed the corner and over which it loomed with its ten floors, looked so straitened, wretched and dark. He scanned its ground floor. No visible entrance. In the semi-darkness that still lingered under the arches in front of it were aligned, one after the other, the three windows of the agricultural machinery salesroom which he had glancingly noticed a moment before while crossing the square. And so, he wondered, how would you enter to reach the floors above? Perhaps at the back? He should remember to ask Ulderico about that when he called him.

In the meantime, Bellagamba had resumed his chatter.

He was offering him advice. Confidential but respectful – speaking in rather subdued tones as well, evidently because a bartender was nearby – Bellagamba had begun to find fault with his plan to push on to Volano. What would be the point of that? – he was saying. Apart from the uncertain weather, it didn't seem to him at all likely that he'd arrive and settle himself in the hide before ten o'clock, however fast he went. And there'd be no serious hunters out there that Sunday, as could be seen from the fact that last night only a single person had taken one of his rooms and gone out, and he wasn't even a hunter at all but someone from Reggio, a salesman for barbers' razors, and if he, Signor Avvocato, were to go, what would he have to shoot at, at ten in the morning? It was pointless. To arrive at the hide so late, you always risk going home empty-handed or worse – out of frustration, you'd start taking pot-shots at a seagull, of which unfortunately there was never any shortage.

'Wouldn't you like me to get a nice bed ready for you instead?'he added, his voice lowered to a whisper. 'Just say the word, and I'll go straight to the hotel and get things ready.'

Bellagamba had turned to look at him. He had the habit of winking, but this time his face was all red as if he were offering him something exotic, if not forbidden. But he was right – he couldn't help acknowledging. There was no denying it. As for the bed, though, not a chance. Far better to get back in his car, and off to Ferrara. It would always be a handy option, in the afternoon, at five-thirty, after a nap: an

outing to the Unione club to while away the time with a game of bridge until supper time.

'No thanks,' he replied. 'It's kind of you, but it wouldn't be convenient.'

He took out his handkerchief and dried his mouth.

'Excuse me – I have to make a telephone call,' he said, raising his face towards the bartender.

'To Ferrara?'

'No. Here in Codigoro.'

The bartender, a forty-year-old with a greasy, sweaty face, sporting a grizzled, three-day beard, stared at him coldly.

'Who do you want to speak to?'

'Cavaglieri, the engineer.'

'Right away!' the other exclaimed, suddenly obliging, extracting a telephone token from a drawer under the till and proffering him it. 'The telephone booth's over there.'

He signalled towards a kind of tall, narrow wardrobe of dark wood and glass, sited against the furthest wall of the big room, beyond the chairs and small tables. And making his way towards the phone booth, he wondered with envy how the mere name of his cousin could prompt so much deference towards him. But he was wrong to be surprised, he reasoned with himself at once. Good heavens! Fifteen years of fixed residence in a small town of a few thousand inhabitants, with a wife who was local, a gaggle of kids and so on – anyone in like circumstances would end up becoming assimilated, even the least disposed to be so. And then, add in Ulderico with his odd but not unpleasant character, which made him sure of himself at every turn in his life, and always so calm and cordial! He was probably a regular at Caffè Fetman, as it was only a few metres from his house.

Having made his way over, he was about to enter the booth.

'Do you have his number?' the barman called out.

He turned round. Down there, Bellagamba was intent on lighting a cigarette, his face hidden in his cupped hands; several customers had looked up and were staring at him.

Of course. The number. It doubtless consisted of just two digits. But which?

He shook his head.

'No.'

'Dial twelve. One. Two.'

He shut himself in and dialled the number. He heard it ringing for a

long while at the other end of the line. Only then did he realize it had a different sound to the discreet, muffled tone of the Ferrara telephone network. Insistent, raw, gratingly metallic, and very hard on the ear.

'Who's calling?' a rude voice finally interrupted, a voice that made him even more inclined to put down the receiver.

'Limentani,' he replied quite loudly, overcoming with difficulty that sort of surprise mixed with embarrassment he always felt in pronouncing his own surname.

'What was that?'

'Limentani,' he repeated.

He was most likely speaking to a housekeeper, an old woman without many teeth in her head, and perhaps a bit hard of hearing. Limentani, Edgardo Limentani. He had to repeat it several times, even breaking it down into syllables. To no avail. The old woman just couldn't understand. Until, finally, she replied that the engineer was still in bed and that Signora Cesarina had just gone into the bathroom.

He hesitated.

'I'm sorry, I don't want to disturb them,' he said. 'But all the same would you tell the Signora that it's their cousin calling, the one from Ferrara?'

'Wait a moment.'

Their cousin from Ferrara – to drag even this out had cost him dearly. And yet he was in no doubt. When she, Ulderico's wife, came to the telephone, keeping any kind of conversation going would be hard work. What sort of person was this Cesarina? The truth is he could hardly remember her. He'd only seen her a couple of times in all when she was a girl, without having any clear impression of her physically and without having exchanged a word. Tall, blonde. Maybe a redhead. After some twenty years – twenty years! – including a marriage of that kind and all the rest of it … And how should he address her – with the informal 'tu' or the polite 'lei'?

In the meantime, no one had picked up the phone, regardless of the fact that the apartment – as he could tell from the noise – was in a state of commotion.

The apartment. It must be big, very big, some of the rooms like enormous drawing rooms. In the one with the telephone, for example, some children were playing right at that moment with a rubber ball. There were at least three of them and all were boys. And from the thuds, their jumps and sprints and falls made on the parquet it wasn't hard to reach a reasonably exact idea of their surroundings and its dimensions.

Far, far away a baby was crying, a baby only a few months old. But then, much closer, he heard the voice of a girl of around fifteen shouting ‘Clementina!’ And as Clementina, shut away who knows where, perhaps in her room or in the toilet, was slow to reply, the other told her to run to Tonino or Tanino. ‘Come on out!’ she said impatiently, but with a laugh. ‘Do come on out, it’s not as bad as that …’

He was holding his breath, without making the slightest movement. It felt as though he too were in the Cavaglieri house, hidden behind some door to eavesdrop and spy on them.

‘Goal!’ yelled a boy from very close by.

‘It doesn’t count!’ protested another younger one. ‘I saw you. Get lost. You sneaked it in with your hand!’

‘No – it was a goal!’ the first boy insisted.

What a din – he said to himself – what utter chaos. If only they’d just go and play somewhere else …

And yet, although, of their own accord, his lips had twisted into a grimace of disapproval and intolerance – see what happens, he thought, when you load yourself down with kids: however spacious and comfortable it is, no house will be big enough, life will turn into a living hell – he felt compelled to remain there, the receiver glued to his ear, listening to the voices and noises with a tense and defeated sort of hunger.

‘Who’s there?’ suddenly, along the wire, a child’s slightly hoarse voice asked.

As a general rule, he didn’t like small children. Even with Rory herself – it had happened early this morning when he had entered her room for a moment – his throat closed up and he could feel himself choking. On the telephone, though, it seemed to be different. One could always find something to say.

‘Edgardo,’ he replied. ‘And what’s your name?’

‘Andrea.’

He heard him breathing heavily. It was obvious what had happened: the boy had seen the receiver dangling down the wall. And since his older brothers weren’t including him in the argument as to whether it was a goal or not, at a certain point it had occurred to him to make the most of the break in the game and have a go on the telephone. Usually he couldn’t reach it by any other means than standing on a chair.

‘How old are you?’

‘Six.’

‘And are you already at school?’

‘Yes.’

‘Which class are you in? The first form?’

‘No. The preparatory first.’

Rory, at seven, he recalled, was already in the third form.

‘We’re a little behind,’ he attempted to joke. ‘But you’re a good boy, at least?’

‘So-so.’

‘What d’you mean, so-so? You have to be a good boy. Surely you know that?’

The child did not reply. His silence coincided with the resumption of the game of football. So, more screams, more running, jumping, thudding. And Andrea stayed there, at the other end of the wire, with the heavy, determined breathing of a little peasant.

Rain or no rain, whatever it cost, he felt a a sudden violent overwhelming desire to be in the midst of the valleys, alone.

He could of course hang up, he thought. Without waiting any longer for the maid who, he could have bet on it, hadn’t managed to convey anything at all clear, neither his first name, nor his surname, nor anything else – who knows what she was still saying to the Signora through the shut bathroom door – he could have easily hung up and made himself scarce. Besides, as soon as he woke up, Ulderico would immediately work out who had called …

And wasn’t this, if anything, the only thing that mattered to him?

He gently put down the receiver.

II

1

Just as he was leaving the telephone booth it occurred to him that out in the valleys he would find everything he needed – serenity, health in body and mind, the joy of being alive. He should waste no time. He walked towards Bellagamba, who, seeing him approach, cast away his cigarette. He paid for the telephone token at the till. Then, finally, with the old Fascist dogging his heels, he strode out.

'Goodbye,' he said as soon as they were outside on the pavement in front of the door.

'This morning,' the other said in dialect, 'they'll be fetching me a fine turbot from Gorino. Would you like me to keep it for you?'

'Please do,' he quickly agreed, only to be free of him.

He stretched out his hand.

'And thanks,' he added, 'thanks for everything.'

He waited for Bellagamba to finish pressing his hand between his two big hairy paws, then turned his back and began to cross the square.

He walked hurriedly, lifting his face every now and then to sniff the air. No rain at all, not a drop. As for the air, likewise, dry: now he could sense it was laden with that characteristic lagoon smell: salty and at the same time sweetish, which stuck so stubbornly and ineradicably to clothes and which, after a short time, always made him hungry. Excellent, he said to himself, in a good mood. During the last quarter of an hour the wind had not only begun to blow, but had also changed direction. It came from the opposite direction, from the sea. If it kept blowing from there for a while, the whole sky would become clear.

To take the road for Pomposa, he had to drive past the Caffè Fetman once again.

Bellagamba was still there, standing on the pavement.

He took the small, lateral road, the entry to which was overshadowed by the I.N.A. building. He quickly reached the river port, crowded as it was every Sunday, by the brown shapes of the boats, one beside another below the dock. Then, after a few hundred metres, he took a right turn. Beyond the bend, because of the cobbles, he had to slow down and drive

at a walking pace. But down there, just after the intersection with the ring-road, he hoped the surface would again be nice and smooth. As indeed it was. He saw the bluish edge of the asphalt drawing nearer and enjoyed the imminent prospect of being able to put his foot down.

He passed the intersection and, just after, the junction of the short road to the cemetery, crowded, especially towards the far end beside the pinkish surrounding wall, with the usual group of Sunday visitors. He pretended not to notice the gesture with which a good-looking blonde girl, standing on the corner dressed all in black and with a veil over her face, was asking for a lift. He put the car into third, then into fourth gear. Soon enough, without his going slower than seventy kilometres per hour, the Pomposa abbey came into view.

How long it had been since he last visited this part of town! – he couldn't stop himself sighing as the Aprilia sped along the final straight stretch of road.

He was glad, however. Glad that the abbey, apart from the undergrowth that now clung more thickly to it – this, a sign that the pumps of the Land Reclamation Company had been able to keep on working undisturbed even in the last few years – had survived the war, preserving its original aspect intact, which was that of a large-scale agricultural enterprise like La Montina. Ah well, he said to himself, staring at the old red stones of the monastery. With that belltower, from one side spacious as a silo of grain; with that church in the midst of it all, which, rather than a church made one think of a hay barn; with those other unadorned buildings on the right like big farmhouses disposed around the barnyard: to all intents and purposes, even if on a bigger scale, every element of Pomposa closely resembled La Montina. And meanwhile he was also glad that, remembering La Montina, repeating its name in his mind, his heart wasn't crushed within the usual grip of bitter regret, anxiety and fear.

Having got as far as Pomposa, he took a right turn towards Romea, then, after a few hundred metres, turned left, all the bends to left and right leading at a slant into the valleys. He breathed deep. Towards the south, as far as the eye could see, he noted the vast, almost marine expanse of the Valle Nuova; towards the north, the stark, reclaimed lands in the distance bordered by the black, uninterrupted line of the Mesola woods. He felt so calm now, so full of energy and faith – it was cold and he'd turned on the heating – and yet it seemed to him, all the same, that the air of the lagoon had seeped into the closed car to expand his lungs. In short, he felt so well that a little later, becoming aware of a

sudden acidic taste in his mouth, he considered this detail hardly impinged on his state of well-being. He shook his head and smiled. It was only natural. Having taken in nothing but two coffees since he woke up – how stupid of him not to have got Imelda to give him a piece of bread, at least, before leaving, and then a quarter of an hour ago at Codigoro not to have remembered to buy a packet of Saiwa biscuits or some cake – all things considered it was perfectly normal that he should now be reduced to this condition. It was clear that he'd have to have something to eat before settling into the hide. Were there any eating places at Volano? Good heavens, surely there must be, even nowadays. At the worst, in any case, he'd be able to scrape together half a loaf of home-made bread or a slice of *ciambella* cake, the rustic kind with big sugar crystals sprinkled all over it, by knocking at one of the doors in the village. What would it cost him to ask? No one at Volano would ever have recognized him. And of course he could pay …

He passed the isolated fish traps at Canaviè, where they used to sell food, but which now seemed utterly decrepit and out-of-commission. He passed Porticino, a place name which, as ever, corresponded to nothing, nor even showed the slightest sign of human habitation. And finally, after the umpteenth twist and turn, there was Volano, with its little low houses lining both sides of the street that crossed the whole village, and far down there the massive parallelepiped of the big Tuffanelli house, against which the street seemed to come to a halt. There were only some hundreds of metres to go – he thought, accelerating – and then he'd find out if Ulderico's man had indeed waited for him. It was unlikely. But now he should take a look. Then, if he was, he could decide what to do.

He passed the semi-deserted village, and slowly, as a sign advised, crossed the bridge over the Volano stretch of the Po, then stopped beside the Tuffanelli house, sheltered from the wind, on the side which looked towards the Valle Nuova, and immediately got out of the car. There wasn't the faintest sign of Ulderico's man. He looked at his watch: a quarter past nine. Who knows how long the poor fellow must have had to wait.

He pricked up his ears. Silence. Only the far cries of unseen birds, high in the sky. Closer, perhaps chained up, a dog howled.

He scanned the huge landscape that surrounded him.

He saw, there, at the edge of the flat terrain of water and small islets through which he had come and which were brightened by patches of sunlight, the belltowers of Pomposa and Codigoro, the former rough, dark, fat and heavy, the latter slender, white and very far off, of an

almost metallic sheen, like a needle. To the right, towards the Greater Po and its estuary, the compact dark mass of the Mesola woods. To the left, the empty stretch of the Valle Nuova, and the other valleys beyond. Finally, Volano, in front of him, and after the bridge, the two parallel rows of shabby houses, some still bearing roofs thatched with straw and cane. He looked. And once again heard the insinuating voice of Bellagamba, the words in dialect with which, an hour before, he'd tried to dissuade him from going on. 'It's not worth the bother, mark my words,' he'd said. He'd seemed all sympathy, commiserating with him.

And yet, no. He mustn't give in, resign himself. This time, without any kind of hesitation, he was ready to ward off the idea of going home immediately, which had once again returned to tempt him. To travel back the other way along the route full of bends which he had recently taken, to pass below Pomposa once again, and through Codigoro, or, even less appealingly, to take a turn around the town, and finally, towards eleven, to see the four towers of the Estense Castle loom up before him in the distance: all of this, he hadn't the least doubt, would effectively plunge him into the depths of that same dark well of acidic sadness from which, at a certain point, he thought he'd safely emerged. And what if he went ahead on his own, without the guide? He would be quite able to get as far as Lungari di Rottagrande on his own. As for shooting, well, agreed, there'd be nothing to shoot at. But he shouldn't despair.

He could even have stayed at Volano. If not for the whole day, at least for some hours. Who knows, perhaps Ulderico's man, that Gavino, actually lived there. And, let's say he did, if for no other reason than to give him the five hundred *lire* owing to him in person, it would be worth seeking him out. His surname was Menegatti – Menegatti, Felisatti, Borgatti, something of the sort. But apart from that, a private house or an inn, a place to hole up in with a modicum of peace and safety, somewhere far away, it didn't matter for how long, from every perspective equivalent to a hide lost in the middle of the valleys – where on earth better than Volano could he find something of the kind? Again, that acidic taste in his mouth. He had to get some food. And soon.

His attention was suddenly drawn to something. On the far bank of the canal, ten or so metres to the right of the bridge and the road, he'd noticed a long, narrow, wooden shack, painted green all over and with a metal roof. It had a brand-new look to it, confirmed by the almost reflective sheen of the paint and by the roof's corrugated-iron sheet that looked fresh from the builders' merchants. What was it? He tried in vain

to read a small sign mounted above the entrance. From a thin tube of Eternit cement, held up on top of the roof by four converging steel cables, billowed forth thick curls of black smoke. As soon as it appeared, the wind dispersed it. Perhaps that was the very refuge for him, he thought, as he observed the smoke closely, studying its composition. It might well be.

He locked the car door, and made his way against the wind towards the shack.

Having got halfway across the bridge, he had only to read above the door SALSAMENTARIA to start salivating profusely. He'd been lucky. He'd be able to find something to eat there without having to go on any long search. Meanwhile, a tall, thin, dark-haired young man appeared at the door, and didn't move off. After he'd closed the door behind him, he simply watched him approach.

2

From how the young man was dressed – visored cap, a sheepskin-lined military jacket, rubber waders up to his groin, but most of all from the questioning insistence of his gaze he worked out at once who it was before him. It was Ulderico's man, Gavino – it couldn't be anyone else.

He raised his arm in a lively wave.

'Good day!' he shouted out.

The young man gave a slight bow. A somewhat stiff bow like a soldier's.

'I was beginning to think you weren't coming,' he said calmly.

'I'm very late, I know,' he replied.

He lowered his head.

'Perhaps it's because I haven't been here in the valleys for at least fifteen years,' he added, with an attempt at a laugh, 'and so, you know how it is, one loses all track of time. I do apologize.'

'Don't give it a thought.'

He'd said 'Don't give it a thought'. Now he gave the faintest of smiles. Did he think him capable of not paying him for his services?

That would have been absurd: absurd from every point of view. He put his hand on his wallet, determined to fish out the five one-hundred-*lire* notes on the spot which, according to the going rates, he owed him. But the other man was quick to stop him. Certainly not, he said with a slight gesture of annoyance. They had plenty of time to sort out the fee. They could get to that 'afterwards'. Right now, it would be much better if they concentrated on getting to the hide. The wind had changed direction, he went on in his calm, precise, almost accentless Italian, lifting his blue eyes to scan the sky. And if they hurried, there was still the chance they'd shoot something.

He's right, he thought. No doubt about it.

'I forgot to bring along something to eat,' he objected, nevertheless. 'I wouldn't want to get hungry. Would it be all right,' he asked, nodding towards the shack, 'if I had them make me a sandwich?'

'As you wish,' Gavino replied. And he stepped aside to let him pass.

Inside, the shack was much bigger than he'd expected.

It consisted of a single room – deep, narrow and in semi-darkness. Along the side walls were widely spaced, cramped windows like embrasures. To the right was a lit fire, and seated motionless in front of it were three old men. Ahead, parallel to the facing wall, was a sales counter divided into two parts: one reserved for tobacco, the other for food. And behind this, on the side of the former, her long raven hair haloed by the scarce light from one of the small windows, the gaunt, pallid, bloodless face of a woman. He stopped just over the threshold and, with half-closed eyes, breathed in the odour that pervaded the locale – a mixture of freshly sawn wood and cheap foodstuffs – without Gavino showing the slightest impatience. The half-dark; the dry warmth; those three customers, there, with their glasses in their hands, their decrepit faces on which the flames incised deep wrinkles as though they were sculptures; the head of the woman behind the counter; the smell of the sawmill, of ham and food in oil and so on: it seemed to him exactly as though he'd ended up in a refuge high in the mountains. What bliss if only he could find some way of staying there! he said to himself, now unable to resist that disheartened feeling he'd begun to grapple with on first catching sight of Gavino. How right and quick he'd been to guess the sheer comfort he'd feel once he'd got inside the shack!

A little later, re-emerging into the air, the light gave him a fortifying, reanimating shock. The baked red of the big Tuffanelli house shone vividly, joyfully: it looked like someone had just finished polishing it. The stretches of water that lay in the Valle Nuova, when he paused for a moment at the peak of the bridge to look at them, astonished him with their extraordinary intensity of blue. They shone blue, not only in the distance, where the hard cold wind flecked them here and there with foam, but also near the bank, there, where half-hidden rivulets between foreshore and foreshore twisted their way as near as two or three hundred metres from where some houses stood.

Yet later still, in the car, going along that sandpit of a road, made ever narrower by the water flowing from the Tufanelli house to Lungari di Rottagrande, new motives for unhappiness and regret began to encroach on him.

The dog, first of all; Gavino's female dog. Youthful and exuberant – a cross between an Italian pointer and a setter, medium-sized, brick-red – there was no hope that she'd stay quiet for a single moment. Gavino switched between talking to her soothingly in dialect, while caressing her mud-spattered flanks, or pulling her down beneath his legs, shouting

at her, even hitting her. All to no effect. Even when it seemed as though she'd given up making a fuss, only sticking her head up like a seal between her master's boots every now and then, the car was still just as full of her, of her obsessive boisterousness, of her life. Leaving aside the smell she gave off, she kept on whining, trembling and fidgeting. Should he stop the car, let her out on her own, to let off steam and chase behind? Not worth even considering, Gavino said at a certain point. In the state of excitement she was in, it was a fair bet she'd dive into the water – with the likelihood that just when they needed her, she'd be nowhere near.

Then there was Gavino – Aleotti Gavino, as he himself had found occasion to specify. Or rather, there were the thoughts that his presence in such close vicinity prompted.

As they went on their way, he gradually found out more about him: that he was from Codigoro, that he had a wife and a baby boy, that from 1944 until the Liberation he had been a 'fighting partisan', and that leaving aside the minor assistance he gave to hunters under commission to the Land Reclamation Company between November and February, for the rest of the year he alternated work as a farm labourer and as a 'construction' worker. Not much, in the end, when the main question remained untouched, that being whether or not he was a Communist – courteous, patient, reserved in speech: from his behaviour he could well be one. On this topic he was able to determine nothing at all.

All the same this wasn't what most disturbed him – it was his physical presence, even more than the dog's. It was odd. But the calm way in which he felt him occupy the space at his side made him nervous, oppressed him. He observed his right hand, resting a little above his knee on the olive-green rubber of his waders. It was a big, dark hand; that of a worker more than a sportsman, with slightly damaged nails and covered in tufts of reddish hair. And every time he looked at that hand, with increasing unease and annoyance, it reminded him of Ulderico. Could he have been his natural son, born before his marriage? he began suddenly wondering, adding to the evidence of the hand, his stature, his pale-blue eyes, their similarly small heads, and especially the calm and the self-confidence of every gesture that they both displayed. Why not? To wait for some hours practically without moving, and then not say a thing! His adherence to such an undertaking which was frankly a bit exaggerated, could also be accounted for by this theory.

He glanced at the man's hand, and rapidly scanned his thin, sun-tanned face with its compact, pointed profile. The wind had changed

direction, he noted at the same time. And yet he, like Bellagamba earlier, seemed to find him at the very least an eccentric for presuming that there'd be something to shoot at so late in the day. It was true that, unlike Bellagamba, Aleotti Gavino hardly spoke at all. Yet wasn't that vague air of mockery that hovered round his prominent cheekbones perhaps just as eloquent and depressing as any speech? And while he was thinking about all this, he blamed himself for being the one to insist that he joined him in the car. What a blunder that was! Had he let him drive his motorbike – before deciding to take up the offer, Gavino had entrusted it to the care of the Tuffanelli house with considerable reluctance – later on, he could have dismissed and been rid of him. Now they were bound together. With cords of steel.

For some time the road, narrowed to a path, had been running along a very slender strip of land, straight as far as the eye could see, and flanked on both sides by open stretches of the lagoon. 'Here it is, we must have arrived,' he said to himself, recognizing the place; and suddenly, to the right, he saw the stern of the punt appear between two stumps of tamarisk bushes.

He slowed down. He steered the car to the right and parked it so that other vehicles, should any appear, could pass. He switched off the motor, applied the handbrake and put the gears into reverse. Finally he opened the door and stepped out into the open air. As Gavino, still wrangling with the dog, gave no sign of moving, he made his way towards the craft alone.

He reached it and touched it with his foot. Painted in dark colours, sloped like a gondola but with a flat bottom, it was exactly like those pre-war boats. Likewise, the floating decoys – metal cut-outs, painted wooden waterfowl and so on – piled up there towards the half-submerged prow seemed more or less the usual kind: many-coloured, as they used to be, as they always are …

He lifted his head.

The wind whistled between the weeping willows and the tamarisks on the shore, bent the thin, grey, plumed reeds that covered some of the small islets facing him. It was cold, much colder than it was in Volano. But when he put on his gumboots and a second pullover under his big Montgomery jacket, which, along with the camouflage raincoat he'd had the forethought to pack in the boot of his car the day before, then he'd be fine, and would have nothing to fear from the temperature.

He thought he heard shots from a long way away. He leaned forwards. Yes, they were shots. From hunting rifles. They were fired from close by

to one another, at regular intervals and continuously.

‘Have you heard how they’re shooting?’ he said, turning towards Gavino, who in the meantime had also got out of the car.

The young man merely nodded. He’d already unleashed the dog who, having run off some fifty metres, paused motionless at the edge of the shore, tensely staring at who knows what in the direction of the open water. He had put down the two rifles and the packet with the sandwiches and fizzy drink a few steps further on.

‘We’ll need to get out the other stuff from the boot as well,’ he added. ‘Take the keys.’

And he turned back towards the valley, trying to establish exactly where the noise of the guns was coming from. He strained his hearing to the limit, narrowing his eyes. Was it possible they were shooting in the vicinity of Romea? So far inland?

3

He'd already taken his place in the hide.

He sat crouched up on the small, uncomfortable stool at the back, and was following Gavino's movements some thirty metres in front of him. The Browning and the Krupp were leaning in front just about within reach, and everything immediately outside the hide was occluded by its upper edge – all except the punt which was almost entirely visible – and at the centre of the space framed by the two rifles' parallel and upright barrels, down there, with the water reaching his thighs, Gavino could be seen bending over his decoy marsh birds like a puppeteer in his theatre. Nothing else was visible.

He lowered his eyes and glanced at the hands of his watch.

It was even later than Bellagamba had predicted – he grimaced to himself: a quarter past ten. But what did it matter to him whether it was early or late? Having slumped back into the exact same state of mind when he'd woken up a few hours before, for now, he restricted himself to looking out and to listening to the muted whines of the dog tied to one of the oarlocks of the boat, the isolated cries of some passing bird, the usual popping tattoo of shots that started off again in the other part of the valley along towards Romea. That was enough for him, and to spare.

He slowly gazed around him.

Considerably reduced in comparison to how it looked at the time when he used to visit with Ulderico – at this rate, in another fifteen years, the Land Reclamation Company's pumps would have drained away all the water that yet remained – the Valle Nuova wore a different complexion. It was far from easy to take one's bearings. Where exactly in the lagoon, for example, was the little islet of a few square metres which housed the hide in which he was hunkering down?

To the right, on the same side as the driveable Pomposa–Volano track, on top of a low embankment, and therefore clearly distinguishable – calculating by sight, he'd have reckoned a couple of kilometres away – a long flat foreshore stretched out, covered with a thick, dwarfish,

tobacco-coloured vegetation, like the mane of an old workhorse. On the opposite side, against the sun, was a second island, of the same kind and the same size as that of the hide, and the same distance off from the foreshore, about a hundred metres, but no more, and beyond it was the just-emergent line of the Lungari di Rottagrande, about two kilometres away as well, with the little, shining, beetle-backed form of the Aprilia right in the middle. Finally, in front of him, at no less distance, lay dry land crowded with poplars. Good. The hide was in the central part of the valley, then, at an equidistant point between the shores …

The wait extended. If he had been seated a bit more comfortably – he thought – and not like this, as if squatting on the lavatory, perhaps he might have managed to doze off. But, in recompense, he could sort out something to eat. He had arranged it earlier. And all the better, at least for that.

He fumbled down below, next to the two boxes of cartridges, for the wrapped-up sandwiches and the fizzy drink. He put them on his knees and took off his gloves. After which, having opened the wrapping, he fished out a sandwich, but just that. Only later would he take out the small bottle.

He sunk his teeth into the sandwich and bit off a piece. But he'd already completely lost his appetite, and, besides that, he was put off by the fact that the bread – which in the semi-darkness of the shack he hadn't realized – was of that French kind, bread that now, it was apparent, had started to make its way into the countryside as well. And then what was that stuff the woman in the hut had filled the bread with? Mortadella? It was greasy, undeniably greasy, yuck. But with a coarse texture. And the taste had something rancid about it that made him recall the years of '42 and '43, and ration books, the time during which he'd tried equally laboriously and willingly to play the role of husband, that of the good husband – effectively the worst years of his life.

Gavino had finished his preparations.

'Just as well,' he muttered.

He swallowed with difficulty. And while he continued to eat his lunch off his knees, groping in the greaseproof paper with his fingers, having given up his first idea to throw away the rest of the sandwich, he watched Gavino return to the hide and didn't take his eyes off him.

He strode forward, swinging his long legs and raising his eyes towards the sky every now and then. And gradually, as he approached, he seemed to him, when seen from below, taller than he actually was, taller with every step. The dog had suddenly stopped her whining. He couldn't

see her, but imagined her still as a statue, waiting for her owner's commands.

Now he was standing over him.

'How many have gone by,' he said. 'Did you see?'

He was joking – he thought. But no, he was serious, although in a way that looked like it was costing him some effort.

'No, I haven't seen a thing,' he replied. 'I've been having something to eat.'

The other nodded at the Browning.

'There's a fair bit of wind and others will be flying past. But with that gun there you'll be able to bring down as many as you please.'

He noticed the pack on his knees.

'How was it?' he asked.

'Not that good.'

Perhaps, he added, it was because he wasn't as yet that hungry. But the mortadella wasn't of the best. And he didn't care much for French bread, never had.

He smiled, or thought he smiled, and then offered him the packet.

'Would you like some?' he said. 'Do help yourself.'

He was amazed that he accepted without being pressed any further. He didn't even say thank you. Having slipped the packet into his jacket pocket, he bent over to set down the now empty decoy case and, most likely, to stroke the dog. Had he offended him? He'd offered him some leftovers. And stale ones, to boot.

'I'm afraid I've already taken a bite,' he said.

'Please! Don't give it a thought.'

'Why don't you take one of the rifles?' he proposed.

'A rifle?' Gavino exclaimed.

He had slowly drawn himself up to his full height, and turned to stare at him.

'To do what?'

It was happening again just as it had at Volano, beside the Tuffanelli house when, without anticipating he would soon regret it, he had insisted he leave the motorbike there and join him in the car.

Why would he not want to take a rifle? he wondered. From that nearby islet – he pointed to it as he spoke – he could shoot at all the birds that he, on his side, had missed, and for the fifteen years he hadn't been in the valleys, who could guess how many that would amount to!

But Gavino stood firm and wouldn't be persuaded.

It wasn't as if, let's be clear – he replied smiling and shaking his head

– it wasn't as if the idea of shooting didn't appeal to him. Rather the reverse. But each to his own job. His job these days was only to accompany gentlemen to the site – he used the words 'these days' and 'gentlemen', nodding at the same time in the direction of Romea – and then, when the hunt was over, to go around in his boat to gather the dead and the wounded.

Yet he finally consented.

'Well, all right then,' he said. 'As you please.'

4

He grasped the Browning by its strap, lifted it up and began trying it out for balance.

He treated it with the skill and cool negligence of someone who'd had a great deal of experience with guns, but at the same time with a kind of diffidence, a veiled displeasure. What was he thinking? Perhaps of how much it would have cost. That must be it.

'Fine rifle,' he said after a while, making a wry face. 'You'll have bought it in Ferrara, I guess?'

'No. In Bologna.'

'Oh.'

For some moments he was rapt, examining the various parts: the barrel, the magazine, the trigger, and mainly the trigger guard below, which was of a special quality of steel – opaque and white, like silver.

'It's new. Have you tried it out yet?'

'I got it last November, and it still hasn't been fired once.'

'And what's the other one? A Krupp?'

'Yes,' he replied. 'It's an old Three Rings rifle from before the war. Made in '28 or '30.'

'I could use that if you'd prefer.'

'No, no,' he quickly replied. 'You start with the Browning for now. And we could swap later if you want.'

He bent down to rummage on the floor of the hide, and brought forth the leather case containing the choke and a box of cartridges.

'Here they are,' he added, holding out both.

He seemed more interested in the cartridges than the choke.

'G.P.,' he read from the box in a muffled voice.

But he looked worried, pensive. Having leant the rifle on his shoulder in his usual phlegmatic manner, he flicked open the lid of the box and drew out a couple of cartridges, then after weighing them distractedly on the palm of his hand, he slipped them into his trouser pocket. Finally, as he leaned down to place the half-opened box in the boat, he frowned slightly.

Why should he do that? Was there something else wrong?

'They're meant to be better than Rottweils and M.B.s. More velocity,' he said.

The other didn't reply. He had already turned to stand up. With his body three-quarters twisted round, he was looking up to the right.

He too began to scan the sky in that direction and almost immediately spotted an isolated bird which, about a hundred metres up, was flying towards them.

'What is it?' he asked.

'It must be a heron,' Gavino said.

It was quite a sizeable bird – with two large, very large, wings, out of proportion with its body, which was thin and small. It advanced with some apparent effort, ploddingly. Its long S-shaped neck, drawn in to its shoulders; its huge brown wings, that seemed made of heavy fabric, opened to waft the biggest possible volume of air under its belly – it looked as though it couldn't manage to fly against the wind and looked at any moment on the verge of being overturned, of being blown away like a rag.

What a comical creature! he thought.

He watched it slowly fly over the stretch of the lagoon which separated the sandbank from the hide and then hover perpendicularly above their heads: keeping practically motionless and slowly gaining a little height. It must surely have been the decoys that attracted the bird here. But before that? Just a little while earlier? What a comical creature! It was a fair question as to what had induced it to fly so far and so laboriously against or almost against the wind, what it had come in search of so very far from the shores, into the middle of the valley.

'I don't think it would be very edible,' he said

'You're right there' Gavino agreed. 'It tastes of fish, or more precisely seagull. But it looks good stuffed.'

The heron once again flew lower. Then one could clearly spot its talons, thin as sticks and tensely drawn back, its large pointed beak, its little reptilian head. Suddenly, though, as if exhausted by its efforts or as if it sensed some danger, it switched directions and, regaining height, within a few seconds disappeared in the direction of the Pomposa church tower.

'It must be written on high,' Gavino said, with a laugh. 'Here it's wise to give a wide berth.'

It was amusing, he realized, but he didn't have any desire to laugh.

He too gestured towards the opposite shore.

‘What’s to stop it getting itself shot over that way?’ he grumbled.

‘No,’ Gavino replied, with one foot already in the boat. ‘Give it some time, and see if it doesn’t fly all the way back here.’

He said nothing more, but pushed the boat out into the water and then, sitting in the stern and shoving off with the oar, he began to row away.

He watched him, covering his eyes against the sun with his hand. He saw him arrive at his destination, step on to dry land, let the dog off its leash, bend down to pick up the box of G.P. cartridges from the bottom of the boat and, finally, having climbed to the top of the islet, quickly search out cover beneath a thicket of marsh reeds. Before firing at almost everything – he must have found something to sit on as only a bit of his cap appeared out of the mass of reeds – he had raised an arm as if to declare ‘I’m here’. Mechanically, he himself had responded with the same gesture.

5

From the effort of staring at the long, close row of decoys far out in front of the hide, he became drowsy. He fell asleep, perhaps even dreamed. Then, coming from his left, a brief energetic whistle woke him with a start.

He looked up.

At a height of seventy, eighty metres, half a dozen ducks were crossing the sky above the hide. Ducks – they were ducks, he thought, while he slid out the double-barrelled gun from between his thighs and rested it on the hide's edge. He could tell by the way that they flew, the sudden, urgent, pulsing rhythm of their short, stocky wings. What kind of duck were they? He'd never been that good at telling right off the various kinds of birds in the valleys. And there were dozens of different types of duck.

They were flying in formation – one at the head and the others in a triangle behind like a squadron of small fighter planes. Hurriedly, like someone running a bit late for an important appointment, and they too were headed in the direction of Romea. 'Safe journey,' he murmured. Unless they were suddenly to change direction they'd be arriving within range of the hunters dug in on the shoreline in front within a minute or so.

They didn't veer. With the wind blowing behind them it was also unlikely they would turn around. But he had only just formulated this thought and replaced the double-barrelled gun back between his legs when he spotted a pair of birds – two almost imperceptible points against the dark wall of cloud growing denser over the dry land – detach themselves from the flock and, after a wide lateral shift, begin their journey back.

He took hold of the Krupp once again. There were indeed just two of them: perhaps a faithful couple, male and female. Passing, they must have spotted the decoys. And now they had returned to take a better look, to make sure of things.

Judging by the slowness with which their forms grew larger, they

must have been flying with great difficulty, and you could understand why, as this time the wind was against them. But apart from the wind, might they not also have been undecided, wavering about which route to take? Perhaps, who knows, they might give it all up after a while. Another U-turn, and in a few seconds they would have disappeared …

For more than an hour he remained like this, with his gun in hand, to watch the birds flying past on their way above him. He didn't shoot. He didn't even try a single shot. It was Gavino alone, behind his bush, who would shoot the birds one after the other when they came within range. *Bang-bang. Bang-bang-bang. Bang-bang-bang-bang. Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang.* A series of two, of three, of four, even of five successive shots – it was rare for him ever to miss his target. And for the creatures, killed or wounded, not to fall down into the water with muffled thuds.

The first to fall were those two ducks – two mallards in all probability – which, having flown almost as far as the opposite shore, had turned back, struggling bravely against the wind. Soon after the same fate had befallen a brace of widgeons, these two having arrived from behind them, from the sea, but coming down just a bit beyond the decoys, gliding with their open wings. Next another mallard, this time alone. Then, after various pauses, a long line of coots. The number of birds Gavino had shot had quickly risen to some thirty. In the meantime, crouched within the hide, he had totted up nothing. He was just there to watch, and nothing more.

It was as though, all the while, he'd been dreaming.

The first two ducks, for example – he'd watched them advance until they were almost hanging motionless in front of the hide, at a range of little over a hundred metres. Suddenly, though, they'd plummeted down. Going at full speed, their brown beaks and their little round bloodshot eyes wide open, he had suddenly found them almost on top of him, unexpectedly enormous. He hadn't fired at them. They had passed by, almost touching him. But a moment later – *bang-bang* – two shots. His stomach felt the hard recoil.

A little after that, a coot had also whizzed very close by him with the hiss of a bullet – that too had seemed part of a dream. It whistled across and past at who knows how many miles per hour. And yet he had been able to observe its every detail: exactly as though it had been motionless, photographed, stopped in mid-air for ever. The lavender-black feathers, lightly tinted a yellow-olive on its back. Its head, neck and the underside of its tail-feathers black. Its breast very slightly paler. The ends of its wings white. Its flat beak blueish. The feet green, shading

into orange nearer the legs. The irises red, barred and glassy. As can happen sometimes, in nightmares, in a second – the second before the five shots fired by Gavino took it in mid-flight and made it plump down into the water like a bundle of sticks – he had been able to see and notice everything and to think about every detail except for taking up his Krupp and pulling the trigger.

Nothing else seemed real to him. Gavino, on his little islet, his forehead wrinkled in a frown and his Browning scorching his hands, was busy scanning above and around so as not to be caught unawares. The dog crouched at his feet, but ready, after each flurry of shots, to leap into the water to retrieve some fresh birds for his master, holding them tight and high in her dripping mouth, and to add them to the pile of dead birds and those in their death throes. He was sitting in his hide, with his rifle in hand, like Gavino, only frozen, unable to make a single move … The real and the unreal, the seen and the imagined, the near and the far: everything became blended, tangled up with each other. Even the normal passage of time, measured in minutes and hours, no longer existed, no longer counted.

Suddenly – it must have been one o'clock in the afternoon – he saw the heron.

It was flying there in front of him, about two hundred metres away, and once again coming from the north, with its characteristic slow and awkward progress like an old Caproni seaplane. He shook himself. 'What an idiot!' he exclaimed. It had very much the air of someone who, just out of curiosity, quite needlessly, would end up getting themselves into deep trouble by and by.

It began flying lower, much lower than before. How many metres high? Fifty at most. Having swung to the left a short while before, once again lured by the decoys, there was every likelihood it would soon be flying overhead. And with the choke attached to the barrel, his Browning would easily have brought it down.

He looked in Gavino's direction. His whole head was sticking out of the bush. He seemed distracted, his head just moving about. Was it possible he hadn't seen it? That he didn't think it worth a single G.P. cartridge? Could well be.

But he couldn't convince himself of that. He remembered the phrase 'But it looks good stuffed', and regretted not having clearly and immediately told Gavino that stuffed birds were something he'd never been able to stand.

It flew forwards, now, always further forwards, making a display of

itself with extraordinary, unbearable clarity. From the back of its perfectly smooth little head sprouted something thin and wire-like, perhaps a kind of aerial. While his heart in the meantime had begun to beat hard against his ribcage, he was wondering about this, about what the devil that strange thing could be, and was screwing up his eyes to see it better when, suddenly, in the vast expanse of sunlit, windy air, he heard the echo of that now familiar double shot.

6

It didn't drop immediately. He saw it flutter upwards, beat its wide brown wings chaotically, then careen towards the islet from which the shots had issued. It struggled to keep itself aloft, to gain height. But then it suddenly gave up, and dropped as though it were breaking into many pieces. It was indeed just like an old-style Caproni seaplane – he had time to say to himself as it plummeted down and into the water – the type used in the First World War, all canvas, wood and wire.

He thought it must be dead and that the dog would rush out to retrieve it. But no. As soon as it had resurfaced, it was ready to rise up on its stilt-like legs and began to turn its tiny head to and fro. 'Where have I ended up?' it seemed to be asking itself. 'And what's happened to me?'

It still hadn't understood a thing. Or very little, for although one wing, the right one, draped down along its side, soon after, it moved its shoulder-blade as though about to take off and fly. Only then must it have realized it was wounded. And in fact from that moment on, it gave up on any further attempt of the kind.

Restless, unceasingly swivelling its smooth, fatuous head, which had the look of a pleasure seeker's – elongated behind the nape by that odd, almost imperceptible spiky antenna – it was clearly trying to orient itself, to recognize at least the objects around it. Only a few yards away, half dry and half in the water, it had noticed the punt. What was it? A boat or the body of a large sleeping creature? One way or the other, better keep clear of it. Better not risk reaching the small beach of fine compact sand which that peculiar and threatening thing lay across. Much better. Besides, the stabbing pain at its side wasn't so noticeable any more. Its wing didn't hurt as long as it wasn't moved. Best keep it still.

He watched it, full of anxiety, utterly identifying himself with the creature. He too was in the dark about what had made so many things happen. Why had Gavino fired? And why didn't he stand up now, and fire another shot, the *coup de grâce*? Wasn't that the rule? And the dog?

What was Gavino scared of: that the heron, not having yet lost enough blood, might defend itself with its beak? And the heron? What could it do? Waiting there was all well and good, but for how long and to what end? He felt his mind confused, befuddled, crowded with questions to which there were no apparent answers.

Quite a few minutes passed in this state. Until, suddenly, he realized the heron had moved.

It was steering itself in his direction – this he could verify, after raising his hand to his eyes to shield them from the water's glare – right towards the hide. This he understood. The heron had spotted the decoys. Brightly coloured and catching the oblique sunlight, it was only natural they should have seemed a flock of real birds, busy feeding. It was worth trusting them. There wouldn't be any danger in that neighbourhood, that was for sure.

It moved forwards, dragging its wing in the water, with short, rapid successive spurts broken by brief pauses, carefully choosing the shallowest stretches of water. It passed beside the decoys, came on again, ever further on. And finally it was face to face with him, just a metre away from the hide, about to reach the shore. It stopped once more. All brown, except for the feathers on its neck and breast which were a faint beige and its legs which were the yellowish-brown of bone stripped of flesh, of relics, it dipped its head to one side, looking at him, with curiosity, certainly, but unalarmed. And motionless, hardly breathing – aware that the bird was losing blood from a gash halfway along the wing by the joint – he had the chance to stare back for a considerable time.

It was now right up against the hide, just like a frozen old codger hoping to catch some sun, and although he could no longer see the bird he could sense its presence. Every now and then it shifted to find a better place or to clean its feathers with its beak. Big, bony, out of proportion, and impeded to boot, it moved clumsily and kept bumping into the hide.

For minute after minute, though, it did the right thing and kept perfectly still. Tucked well in from the cold, whistling gusts of the sea wind, and with the warm planks of the hide at its back, what was it up to? Perhaps it had even cheered up a bit. Although even now it hadn't understood very well, it had to keep a sharp eye out for everything. Gather its strength: this for the moment, it was telling itself, must be the main aim. And once it had gathered its strength, *whoosh*, it would suddenly spread its wings and fly away.

More time passed, who knows how much.

All of a sudden, three shots were fired in close succession, followed by thuds which shook him with pain.

He turned his head towards Gavino.

'Isn't that enough now?' he said half-aloud.

He waited for the birds to surface – all three of them coots, lifeless – and looked at his watch.

Unfortunately, it was no later than two o'clock, and there would be light good enough to shoot in for at least another hour and a half. But even if, personally, he'd had more than enough at this point, would it be all right to lift his arm and signal to Gavino to call it a day? True, for a while the heron hadn't budged at all. But in case it should still be alive, what could he do with it anyway? Finish it off point-blank – no, that was out of the question. Capture it, then? Lean out of the hide, gather it in his arms and then carry it back to town? In the car? And to keep it where? In a cage down in the courtyard? He could foresee Nives' response when she saw him return with a creature like that, and wounded besides, with no end of fees to pay the vet, just for starters. He could foresee her shouting, her protests and her whining …

The dog had ended its traipsing back and forth. He'd retrieved the last coot and carried it to his master. Then, turning by chance to the right, towards the sandbank, as if seeking a prompt of some sort from that direction, she saw the heron once more.

It was now some ten metres away from the hide, and judging by the direction it had taken it looked as if it was heading for the sandbank. The din of the last shots just before had certainly given it a fright. Then it had seen the dog go back and forth three times, each time coming ashore with a coot in its mouth. And although wounded, although weakened with loss of blood, and so, more than ever, eager to enjoy the last heat of the sun, shielded from the wind, from one moment to the next the bird had decided it would be sensible to move somewhere safer, and quickly. The broad sandbank there, covered with thick plants more or less the same colour as its feathers, and at the same time high enough to allow a way through without being spotted, perhaps represented the best solution to all its problems. To hide in there, for the meantime, awaiting the night, which was not far off. And then, after that, to wait and see. Because it wasn't clear that the sandbank was completely surrounded by water. Who could say whether or not it was linked in some way with dry land? And dry land within reaching distance would have meant another possibility of escape, perhaps even of safety, or if

perhaps not of absolute safety, the almost certain guarantee of keeping alive at least until tomorrow.

Meanwhile, it was moving ever further away, arduously dragging its broken wing behind it, and he felt able to read this whole chain of reasoning from the posture of its stubborn little slender neck. But how wrong it was! – he suddenly exclaimed to himself. It was completely deluding itself – fine, as far as reaching the sandbank, but the dog, soon to be off the leash and free to follow her nose, with all that blood it kept on losing, wouldn't have the slightest difficulty in flushing it out – it was fooling itself to such an extent, it was obvious, the stupid thing, that if the thought of shooting it hadn't seemed to him the very same in some way as shooting himself, he would have immediately opened fire. So that, if nothing else, it would be all over.

III

1

He wanted to return to Codigoro as soon as possible.

‘Goodbye,’ Gavino was saying. ‘If you need me again, you can always contact me via the engineer.’

‘Understood.’

‘And thanks.’

‘For what? It’s me that should be thanking you.’

He had already backed the car up. Through the windscreen he could see the humped back of the suspension bridge. In a moment, he would be gone.

He wound up the car window, and only at this moment, after a fairly animated disagreement between them about the distribution of the game – he trying to offload the whole lot on to Gavino and the latter obstinately refusing to accept any of it – he began to examine the man’s face. Dignified, as ever, but on the alert – cracked lips, the gaunt face of one who’s gone hungry, he was smiling weakly, as if asking to be forgiven. Finally, he was confident that, even through the dirty window, he could see Gavino for who he really was. Someone paid a wage of five hundred *lire* a day. In the end an undistinguished peasant, a poor devil.

And yet, a minute or so later on the minor road to Pomposa, going over this again in his mind gave him no comfort. A hired labourer – he kept repeating to himself – a wretch who, despite the airs he gave himself of being a gentleman and a Communist Party member, despite his pretence of not accepting any gifts, not even a brace of ducks, and especially not the carcass of a heron fit only to hand over to the taxidermist. On his motorbike and with the dog straining to trot along behind him, who knows how long it would take him to reach Codigoro? It was utterly useless. Without worrying that the car going at full speed might end up in the valley or else in the wide canal which, after Pomposa, flanked the right-hand side of the road, he took the curves so fast that the tyres whistled on the asphalt; it was exactly as if Gavino, the dog, and everything the two of them forced him to remember, were gaining on him, or were even now hot on his heels.

He sped along with his hands gripping the steering wheel and his eyes fixed on the road; and kept on thinking.

At Codigoro, he would certainly have been able to get rid of the dead birds with which the car boot was crammed: an embarrassing and revolting freight that at every curve he seemed to sense shifting softly from side to side. At Codigoro, in addition, famished as he was – since the moment he'd turned his back on the Tuffanelli house and Volano, he had again felt such an appetite that he feared nothing would satisfy it – he could eat a proper meal, and not only the 'fine turbot' which Bellagamba had spoken of at eight o'clock that morning, but anything and everything else he cared to order. What's more, the stop at Codigoro, which fitted in perfectly with his plan, would give him an excuse to put off, for at least another three hours, his return to Ferrara, which, with every kilometre, seemed overcast with ever-darker and gloomier hues. All things considered, between having lunch, offloading the game on to somebody and relaxing for a while – and Ulderico? Couldn't he also pay a visit to the Cavaglieri household? – he wouldn't have time to hit the road again before six. And if at six, the fog were to come, all well and good. In that case he would arrive when he arrived – with the dinner table already cleared, or maybe, all of them would already have gone to bed by then, the Manzolis downstairs included.

A little before Codigoro, at the same level as the cemetery, a compact, black wall of mist suddenly appeared in front of the bonnet, obliging him to put his foot down violently on the brake. Fog, no, it didn't seem to him like fog. Perhaps it was only a low cloud which a breath of wind would be strong enough to disperse. In the meanwhile, however, at hardly a quarter past three in the afternoon it was as if night had already fallen. The clear air that had surrounded him until only a moment ago now seemed in the distant past, so remote as to be unbelievable.

He entered the town at walking pace, headlights ablaze and windscreen wipers on the go. He could hardly see a thing. The smoky dark, his impatience to sit down before a sumptuously laid table and, most of all, the persistent feeling of being pursued, absurd as of course he knew it was, but no less real for that, made him unable to turn his gaze away from the unbroken yellowish glare that was revealed before him by the headlights. He progressed laboriously, as if through a kind of underground alleyway, ever more anxiously impatient to be in the dining-room of the Bosco Elìceo. The small lobby of the hotel and the floors above it, he more or less knew. But the dining-room, doubtless

adjoining the lobby on the other side of the wall opposite the staircase, what was that like? He imagined that, by now, at a quarter past three, it was full of loud, happy folk, of eaters and drinkers used to eating and drinking for hour after hour, slowly and without pause, in a warm, perhaps overheated atmosphere flooded with electric light and impregnated with the smells of food, damp clothes and greasy leather. And he couldn't but marvel that, for such surroundings, which in normal circumstances he would have faced with reluctance, oppressed in spirit, fearful of unpleasant encounters, he now experienced in himself such a strong and irresistible attraction.

Cutting across the dark, fluctuating lake of mist which submerged the square, he took the narrow road towards the Bosco Elìceo, and in a few moments was in front of the hotel. Parked along the curb on the other side of the street opposite the hotel was a row of cars. But there was no shortage of parking space right there in front of a lateral strip of neon, already lit. As he was manoeuvring into the space, Bellagamba came into his mind again. Perhaps he would be willing to take the game off his hands? In which case, parking the Aprilia there would be very convenient. Unburdening the boot of the dead birds and carrying them inside would be a cinch, and the neon light would further facilitate the whole operation.

He got out of the car. As the guns were in the boot as well, he didn't bother to lock the door. He crossed to the other side of the street. He pushed open the hotel's glass door and entered, taking off his cap in the warmth and the smell.

No one was in the small office with the desk, not even the old guy with the salt-and-pepper thatch with whom he'd exchanged a few words that morning. But the confused noise of voices and crockery that issued from behind the swing doors to the right of him immediately set his heart racing. So he wasn't mistaken! In no time, when he arrived in the dining-room, he would surely find, if not a plate of food ready for him to devour immediately, then everything else he desired: calm, safety, a better mood, a precise and balanced sense of things. But then, during the brief wait for some real food to get his teeth into, couldn't he just begin with half a loaf of bread and with a glass of house wine? Drinking had never really been his thing. Yet today, perhaps because of the dank cold he'd endured in the hide, he felt a real desire for wine. Almost more than for food.

As soon as he'd entered the dining-room, he saw it was a huge crowded space, noisy and smoky, just as he'd imagined it, true, but

much darker, and so with something sad and squalid about it. Bellagamba rushed to welcome him with open arms. When he'd first come in, the man was standing gesticulating by a table of ten or so customers, far away, the one furthest from the door, beneath a window on the back wall. He was laughing and making the others laugh – telling them who knows what. Until he spotted him. Then he immediately abandoned the company.

'I was convinced you'd gone straight back to the city,' he said in dialect, raising his voice above the noise. 'So how did it go?'

He shook his hand between both of his own while studying him solicitously with his gaze. With no jacket on, he was still wearing that rust-grey pullover with a kind of cyclist's high collar and which extended over his riding breeches.

He winked.

'Have you already had lunch?'

'No.'

'What an appetite you must have by now then.'

'Not too bad, but I'd like to eat.'

He'd expressed himself drily, much more so than he would have liked. The fact was that he found this long preamble exasperating.

'Right away. Right away,' the other stammered, intimidated, stepping aside.

He was looking round.

'Would you like to sit over there?' he finally proposed, pointing to a table in the corner, to the left of the entrance.

From a distance, he noticed the tablecloth covered with crumbs, used toothpicks and wine stains, and once more felt a shiver of disgust. But there was no other choice.

'Thanks,' he said.

He walked on, reached the table and sat down.

He took a deep breath.

'What can you offer me?'

'Whatever you'd like,' Bellagamba replied.

He was facing him from the other side of the table, a little bent forwards, resting his hands on the back of a chair. Behind him, the waiters – four or five stout country lads with dirty white jackets like hospital stretcher-bearers, continually in demand, laden with plates, red in the face, their necks dripping with sweat and constantly rushing between the kitchen and dining-room – went by without giving them a look.

‘I still have that fine turbot,’ he added, winking again. ‘I’ve kept it aside specially for you.’

‘Good. Will it take long to cook?’

‘Depends. Depends on whether you’d like it boiled or grilled. Boiled would be only twenty minutes.’

He’d have to be patient. He lowered his eyelids.

‘And grilled?’

‘Longer. At least half an hour.’

He opened his eyes and looked at his watch. Three thirty.

‘I’ll have it boiled then,’ he said. ‘But in the meantime, have you something already prepared? To have now.’

Bellagamba revealed his small, compact teeth in a nervous smile. The veins in his forehead were strangely swollen. What was wrong with him? From the depths of their sockets, his blue eyes were staring at him bewildered, or so he thought: with the anxiety, for whatever reason, of an animal that senses danger.

‘Would you like a fish starter?’ he murmured. ‘Prawns, baby octopus, mantis shrimps, marinaded eel … there’s a bit of everything.’

He felt his mouth fill with a gush of saliva.

He swallowed.

‘Go on, bring them,’ he replied.

And while the other man was already walking away towards the door that opened on to the kitchen, he added:

‘Don’t forget the bread. And the wine.’

Soon he felt suffocated by the heat.

He stood up, took off his heavy jacket and one of the two pullovers he was wearing and threw them down in a heap with his fur cap on the seat opposite. Despite this, as soon as he sat down again he realized that wouldn’t do. The skin on his forehead, his nose, his cheeks, enflamed by long exposure to the sun and the wind, had begun to feel swelteringly hot. With his elbows leaning on the table and his face in his hands, he reflected that, naturally, the only thing to do would be to have a wash in some cold water straightaway. And he was about to get up to look for the ground-floor toilets, when, seeing Bellagamba rushing towards him between the tables, laden with plates of antipasto and bread, and also with a bottle of wine clasped tightly under his left armpit, and with a clean tablecloth folded in four, he changed his mind. For now, he might as well fill up with a bit of food. And later, if he still wanted to, he could go and freshen up.

2

Bellagamba wished him '*buon appetito*', and before the man had turned on his heels he had already started in on the antipasto. He was famished – what an appetite! It felt like he'd never had such an appetite in his whole life.

He filled his mouth with the sweet and sour pulp of crustaceans and swallowed, then washed it down with gulps of wine and stuffed himself with bread. Very quickly, however, he felt disgusted – with the food and with himself. What good was it all? he wondered. With his head lowered, in his corner, in that heat, in that stink, in that greasy and promiscuous half-darkness, to be chewing away, swallowing, sucking, swilling. As his stomach swelled his sense of disgust increased.

Worse than ever – that, unfortunately, was how things were.

Once again, there was nothing that didn't grate and jostle and hurt him. Between one mouthful and the next, he had only to lift his head, to let his eyes rove around the dining-room, and, each time he did so, whether his gaze fell on that long table entirely composed of hunters that when he'd entered he'd spotted Bellagamba attending to – he'd gone back to them and had immediately begun talking, arguing, bawling confusedly, laughing – or else if he exchanged glances with another customer, it didn't matter which, but especially with a woman of about thirty, dark-haired, pale, stout, heavily made-up, who was sitting at a table not far from his own, without doubt a prostitute: her mouth declared it to him, the way she smoked, her nails, her dark, unduly respectable trouser suit, her fur coat arranged with care, as if on a coat-hanger over the back of the chair beside her, the large handbag placed in plain view beside the ashtray crammed full of butts, and her eyes, mainly her eyes, black, opaque, a bit like an animal's, which roved untiringly in search of clients to take upstairs (of course with the connivance of the owner, of Signor Gino) to one of the hotel rooms – each time, he was overwhelmed by a sense of envy very like that which had tormented him all morning in the hide, when he hadn't managed to find the strength to fire off a single shot, despite the double-barrelled

shotgun he'd been toting in his hands. How careless and happy they were, all these others! he kept repeating to himself, lowering his head to his plate once more. How clever they were to be able to enjoy life! His food, it was clear, was of a different kind, irremediably different from that of normal people who, once they've eaten and drunk, think of nothing else but digesting it all. Throwing himself at the food and drink would do him little good. When, after the antipasto, he had guzzled the rest of it as well, the turbot, the gorgonzola, the orange, the coffee, he would slump back into his glum ruminations about the usual things, both old and new. He felt them waiting in ambush for him, ready to leap on him, as before and as always, and all of them together.

Wherever he was, Bellagamba didn't lose sight of him for a second, that he was sure of. The birds, he thought. Why hadn't he immediately asked Bellagamba to take them? Perhaps the disquiet that continued to torment him was down to that and only that.

He raised his hand and signalled.

Passing swiftly between the tables, the other man came towards him.

'Is everything fine?' he asked with a worried air, nodding at the plate.

He swallowed and dried his lips with the napkin.

'Perfect,' he replied.

He didn't know where to begin.

'Listen,' he finally said. 'My car boot is full of game. Would you like to have it?'

He saw that Bellagamba was smiling. It was obvious. The man thought he was proposing a deal, a business arrangement. Or perhaps a kind of small exchange in kind: some game for a lunch, and later, a bed.

'It's a gift,' he added. 'Let's be clear about that.'

He downed the whole glass of wine in one swig and again wiped his mouth.

'With all the ducks and coots,' he went on, 'I think there might be more than forty birds. Among them all there should even be … even be a heron.'

'Heavens!' exclaimed Bellagamba. 'A heron. How did you manage to shoot that? It'll be one of the white ones, I'm guessing.'

'No. A red one.'

He said this. And suddenly, in the dusky light, after the shots had been fired, as if the large, earthy and confused face that was leaning down in front of him from the other side of the table had been whisked away, he once again saw the dog with the heron in her mouth. Utterly bled dry – the dog had reached it among the tobacco-coloured plants of the

shoreline to his right when it was already dead – how much could it have weighed? Little more than its feathers did, so hardly anything at all …

He blinked.

'What a shame!' Bellagamba said, his lips twisted in a grimace of disappointment. 'The white ones are bigger, more beautiful, and look far better when they're stuffed … But the red ones are lovely big birds as well. Would you like me to organize that, to have it all sorted for your next visit? Here in the square –' and saying this he lifted his arm to point to the square outside, shrouded in shadow and fog – 'here in the square we have a shop where they do these things very well,' adding, in dialect, 'a sight better than you'd find in the city, if you ask me. If you'd like we can go over there later and take a look. Today, it's a holiday, but they keep the window lit up, even on Sundays.'

He shook his head emphatically.

'Heavens, no.'

He must have assumed an expression of disgust – of all the disgust he always felt oppressed by at the mere thought of a taxidermist's workshop – God, what a ghastly stink there'd be, a mixture of a poulterer's, a chemist's, a lavatory and a morgue … On the other hand, it wasn't as if he was obliged to explain himself. Better cut things short. Let Bellagamba stand there gawping at him for as long as he liked.

He fished the car keys out of his pocket and pushed them across the table towards him.

'Take them,' he said. 'You know my car. I've parked it out there in front.'

The other stretched out his hand. Halfway there, however, it came to a halt.

'Talking of which,' he said, lowering his voice, his round, catlike eyes aglint, 'have you thought any more about it?'

'About what?'

'You know … the car!'

He took a seat facing him.

He continued in dialect, with an uncertain smile, full of embarrassed shyness: 'Might we come to an arrangement, *sgnór avucàt*?'

Now it was his turn not to understand.

But then he suddenly remembered their brief discussion that morning, a little before he'd left. And while he listened to everything Bellagamba was telling him, specifically that day by day, without a van, managing the restaurant and hotel was becoming more and more difficult – the

bike and sidecar he owned, a Harley Davidson swapped for some tobacco at an A.R.A.R. camp,[fn1] which, because of its big engine size, consumed almost more petrol than a Balilla, he could imagine how inadequate that was! – while he listened and kept on eating and drinking as well, increasingly, he was overwhelmed by a sense of futility. Bellagamba spared no efforts in persuading him to sell the Aprilia, expatiating minutely on all the uses he could put it to. These days – he was saying – it's not enough to wait for some passing hunter to deliver wild game; if, that is, someone does stop by, that's all well and good, if not, you just have to keep on hoping. To meet the ever-increasing demand of his clientele, it made sense for him to acquire it directly from the 'heavyweights' of the hunting world, such as Commendatore Ceresa and his associates, who'd be likely to bring down a hundred, a hundred and fifty kilos of game at a time. There was no other way to do it – you needed to be there in person in the valleys, at the 'source', at around one o'clock in the afternoon, to buy in bulk and then be off. The same thing for fresh fish straight out of the water, which, if you hadn't the chance of leaving Codigoro really early in the morning, when it's still dark, so as to arrive at Goro, or Gorino, or Porto Tolle, or Pila, or even as far away as Chioggia, just when the fishing vessels came to the shore, and chiefly to be there on four wheels, that was the only way to do it, if you didn't want to come back with only a few kilos of fish. The man kept on talking, explaining, gesticulating. And he, meanwhile, his head ever heavier, could find nothing to argue with. He understood Bellagamba, he understood him and could see how sound his arguments were. The car, of course he needed it. No question about that. Instead of selling him it, it would almost be better to give it to him. With all the birds in the boot as well.

After a while he shook himself. He looked around. His gaze alighted on the table of hunters, down there, in the smoke. So far away, it was as though the whole vast Valle Nuova lay between him and them.

'Who are those people?' he asked.

'It's the man I mentioned, Commendatore Ceresa, and his friends,' Bellagamba replied contritely.

'They are gentlemen from Milan –' he went on – 'more or less all of them working in industry. Since last year, as an association, they have rented a stretch of the valley from Pomposa to Vaccoline, quite close to Romea, from the Land Reclamation Offices. They usually arrive by car on Saturday evening. They dine here at mine but then prefer to sleep at the splendid deluxe "lodge" constructed entirely out of wood that they

have had put up in a jiffy, within spitting distance of the water. Today, though, they're about to leave, and should be back in their homes around nine this evening, that's of course if the big fog on the Via Emilia doesn't stop them.'

'They're folk who fork out big-time, that's for sure,' he concluded in dialect. 'Would you like me to introduce you? When I come back, I could easily do so.'

Left alone, he finished eating the remains of the antipasto, then stood up. His face was flushed and hotter than ever. He had to wash it.

Swaying a bit, he passed in front of the woman in the trouser suit and, having crossed the dining-room, went to shut himself in the toilets next to the kitchen.

Besides being cramped and incredibly foul-smelling, and still populous with old flies that had survived the summer, the room was far from comfortable. A small semi-circular basin of chipped porcelain, with a greenish, soaked and dirty terrycloth hand towel hung on a hook on the wall next to it. On the floor was the hole of a Turkish toilet, filthy and half-blocked with newspaper. Hardly any light. No mirror. Not even a trace of soap.

He turned on the tap of running water and washed his face as best he could. He dried himself with his handkerchief. Finally, though in no great need, he turned in the opposite direction to urinate.

He succeeded only after a while. When was it – the last time he'd gone? he wondered. And just as he asked himself this, and recalled the last time had been hardly an hour ago, on the Lungari, when, so as not to be seen by Gavino he had chosen to conceal himself behind the opened car door, it wasn't so much the thin colourless stream of his own urine that he was staring at, but rather, with a curiosity, surprise and bitterness he'd never felt before, at the member from which the stream issued. 'Huh!' he exclaimed with a grin. Grey, wretched, a mere nothing, with that sign of his circumcision, so familiar and yet so absurd … In the end, it was nothing but an object, a pure and simple object like so many others.

3

‘Here’s the key,’ Bellagamba said. ‘It’s number twenty-four on the second floor. I’m sorry you’ll have to climb so many stairs. But up there, you’ll have every comfort and there’s a bath too.’

They were waiting in the entrance, facing each other as they had been that morning, Bellagamba seated behind the reception desk, the lower part of his face, his square jaw and sagging cheeks in the circle of the lamp’s yellowish light, and he standing, with his arms laden with his jacket, pullover, fur cap, gloves. Yet they weren’t alone. He heard people continually passing behind his back, the last customers on their way out. From the corner of his eye he saw them, a few at a time, reach the door that gave on to the street, then disappear, hunched and well-wrapped shades, into the fog and the darkness.

He rubbed his thumb between the other thumb and forefinger.

Busy replying to the fragmentary goodbyes of the customers leaving, Bellagamba suddenly seemed to him inattentive, distracted. Until a moment before, he’d been giving him his full attention, insisting in every possible way that he should accept the offer to go to an upstairs room to take a ‘nap’. Now, by contrast … But it was clear that he didn’t know how to divide his attention. He would very much have liked to accompany him upstairs personally, as he kept repeating, if only he, Signor Avvocato, would be a little patient, in five minutes, at most, he would certainly be able to do so.

‘Don’t worry,’ he’d replied at a certain point, wearily shaking himself out of the torpor into which he’d fallen. ‘Let it be.’

‘Are you sure you know where your room is?’

‘Of course.’

‘Number twenty-four, second floor, the left-hand corridor, third door on the right.’

‘Good.’

‘And at what time would you like to be called?’

As usual, the other man was observing him with the air of someone with a particular motive who pretends there isn’t one. He was fairly

drunk, true, but still alert enough to notice that.

'Now it's four o'clock,' he continued. 'Should we say at six?'

He tried to concentrate. If he were to wake up at six, when would he manage to leave? And then when would he get home by? Wasn't there the risk of …? Once again, his mind grew muddled. Better give up any attempt to reason. Better just move and flake out on a bed straightaway. Try to get some sleep.

Without replying, he passed the side of the desk and moved towards the stairs.

'Have a good sleep!' Bellagamba shouted after him, adding in dialect 'and be careful not to take a header down the stairs, for God's sake!'

He started to climb the stairs, his right hand gripping the rail. His jacket, pullover and so on, bundled up beneath his left arm and heavy as lead, his stomach crammed with food and wine – so full and swollen that he ought to have let out his trousers by two or three notches – every step cost him an immense effort. As he went up, he stared at the feeble, dusty lamp that hung high up on the ceiling of the first landing and told himself that, No, he'd never be able to drag himself all the way up to the second floor. It seemed impossible, an exertion way beyond any strength he had. The porthole window, a little below the light source of the lamp, was completely blind. A black disc, extinguished and opaque.

He reached the landing, turned to the right, broached the second staircase, set foot on the mezzanine landing, and began climbing again. At last, completely out of breath, with his heart beating madly within his thoracic cage and his head more giddy than ever, he found himself before the second-floor bathroom door. So he was there, motionless, still gasping, his gaze once more drawn to the small dark vertical letters of the enamelled sign on which was written BATHROOM, but he was numb, empty of all thought. Around him there was absolute silence. Even Bellagamba's voice, that loud baying that, every now and then, rose upstairs from the depths to vex his ears, had gone silent. All he could hear was his own panting, the beating of his heart and the throbbing at his temples.

As soon as he was in his room, stretched out on the bed – recovered now from his breathlessness – he immediately tried to fall asleep. He ought to have undressed, or at least to have taken off his shoes and turned off the light. But no matter. If he'd had the patience to stay there with his eyes closed for a few minutes, forcing himself not to move and, above all, not to think about anything, there was not the least doubt that with all he'd drunk he would most certainly have fallen asleep.

And yet there was no way – he couldn't keep still. He had turned on to his right side, then on to his left, then again he had turned, to lie on his back, and soon after he knew he'd start all over again. How odd: before he'd been stumbling every which way and now, instead, lying down, he felt as though threaded with faint, repeated electric shocks. Shifting, restless, alert, even his eyeballs seem to be hurting. In the cavity of their orbs it seemed as though two small beasts had made their dens, so swollen with blood as to be on the verge of bursting and yet still avid to swallow more, two greedy little monsters as ready to tense and pounce as the fleeting swarms of those sparks, the glinting commas of light, that were closing in on them from all sides.

Not thinking was likewise impossible. It was like a ribbon that was unspooling of its own accord, an unstoppable, monotonous, sequential reel of images. There was Bellagamba, for example. Against the dark screen of his quivering eyelids, or against the no-less-dark screen of thick shadows in which, if he opened his eyes, his gaze became submerged, there he was with his leathery face always thrust forwards, continually twisted up into unpredictable grimaces, winks, wrinklings of the forehead, odd twitches of his eyebrows, his nose, his lips, his tongue. Then immediately afterwards, other faces – the face of Nives, framed by her pillow; that of his mother, with the eternal black velvet ribbon hanging loosely around her neck; then Gavino's face out of the Aprilia's side window; and even those of the hunters from Milan, one after another, Commendatore Ceresa and his companions, about whom Bellagamba had been so loquacious: industrialists, the big shots, the sharks with the luxury chalet not far from Romea. It was obviously money – he told himself with bitterness, feeling once again offended by certain, very costly articles of hunting equipment that group would be supplied with (which, as it happened, he hadn't even seen), buckskin jackets, pigskin or chamois gloves, multi-coloured sweaters of Norwegian wool or cashmere, strange, distinctive footwear. But, even more than that, the way they'd heaped their stuff on top of an extra five or six chairs, the way they spoke to each other or turned to Bellagamba (he standing by respectfully, their host and servant), and yet kept him at a distance – it was money, cash, that conferred such assurance, such good health and made the one who possessed more than a certain quantity of it appear as if of a different race, stronger, more full of life, more attractive, more likeable! Money, cash, dosh: in the vicinity of those who had it, everything, but *everything* – Fascism, Nazism, Communism, religion, family quarrels or affections, agricultural

disputes, bank loans and so on and so forth – everything else all at once became of no concern or importance.

Suddenly he saw before him the face of the woman in the dark trouser suit whom he'd noticed down in the dining-room – her big pallid face, that of an ex-farmworker, probably from the neighbourhood, her large lustreless eyes which seemed focussed on nothing, her fat, fleshy lips, caked with lipstick. Before they'd parted Bellagamba had yelled merrily 'Sleep well!' But, on reflection, what did Bellagamba have to be so merry about? He was joshing him of course, the way someone does who has too much need of you and of your protection, especially in the case of someone who's drunk. Yet mightn't it be that Bellagamba was trying in his own way, as a proficient pimp, to indicate that he should relax and not concern himself, because the whore, who'd cost no more than a thousand *lire*, with whom he'd seen his guest exchanging glances throughout lunch, was a thing that he, Gino Bellagamba, could easily procure for him and could send upstairs to his room without delay? That was it for sure. That was what Bellagamba had been promising, now he understood, with all his winking, with all his continuous, perpetual half-saying and not saying!

He heard footsteps in the corridor. He searched gropingly behind his head for the light switch, and finding it, pressed the button. It was bound to be her – he said to himself, sitting up on the bed – it could only be her. After having announced herself with all that slapping of slipper soles, in a moment she'd be knocking on the door. Or else, opening the door no further than was needed, she'd slip straight inside.

He put his feet on the floor and, slowly, doing up his trousers, he walked towards the door. His heart had begun to beat madly again. He was sure he was right. A question of seconds, and then … the latch would be lowered, the door would begin to edge open, slowly, cautiously, inexorably, and then suddenly he would find that strange creature before him, face to face. And so? How would he react at that point? From the time when, as boys, they'd frequented brothels together, Ulderico had always been very curt and brisk with prostitutes. Not vulgar or brutal, of course. Minimum chat and down to the act. While he, on the contrary – apart from the fact that for something like eight years after getting married, the idea of going with a prostitute hadn't even entered his mind – had always been shy, insecure, solicitous and, on every occasion, needing an interminable preamble before he got round to the infamous act …

From the depths of the room the tall mirror of the straw-coloured

wardrobe reflected an image of himself standing beside the door: a remote and sketchy image, as though about to dissolve. So how should he behave? he asked himself in confusion. Give her something and send her away? Why not? Later, it was true, he would have to see her with Bellagamba, put up with a new series of more or less sly hints of one type or another. Important, though, not to hesitate. Let her come in, keep her there talking for a short while, and finally be rid of her, pressing two or three hundred *lire* into her hand. He saw no other way out of a situation like this.

4

As the latch was not lowered, at a certain point he wondered whether it wouldn't be better to open the door himself. Unfortunately, he hadn't left the key in the lock. If he had, he could have locked himself in without standing there getting into such a state.

He opened the door and, seeing no one there, stepped out into the half-darkness of the corridor. He looked right towards the landing, then left towards the end of the corridor. No one, not a soul. How was that possible? There was no doubt, he *had* heard the sound of footsteps. He was quite sure he hadn't imagined it. Perhaps it had been an employee, perhaps the cleaning woman? On a Sunday afternoon? Why not? It wasn't that strange once he thought about it.

In the meantime, he left the door half-closed and made his way along the corridor as far as the landing. He leaned on the banister, and looked down into the dark abyss of the stairwell. From the ground floor, along with a faint gleam of light, came a vague hum of stoves, of tables being shifted, of footsteps, of faraway voices. It was evident – he told himself, yawning – that they were clearing the dining-room and getting it ready for the evening.

He went back into his room and locked the door. After which, hurriedly undressing, he slipped back into bed. He had kept on his woollen underclothes. But no sooner had he drawn the covers up to his nose than he was shaken with an extended shivering. The sheets were cold and damp, especially at the bottom of the bed around his feet. Still, nothing like as bad as before. Without anything clinging tight about his waist, he felt infinitely better. Even his stomach seemed far less heavy.

He stretched out an arm to switch off the light, turned on his right side and yawned till tears came to his eyes. And almost immediately, with the sudden permission of his whole being, he was aware that his mind had misted over, that he was falling asleep and dreaming.

He dreamed he was once again on the stairs of the Bosco Elìceo, once again climbing up them, step by step, intending to reach the second floor. What he was going to do up there was not clear. He was simply

ascending, effortlessly, with a mysterious lightness, even. He shook his head. A moment before, down below, Bellagamba, winking, had offered to have him carried up on a stretcher by a pair of sturdy youths he'd recruited as waiters from the neighbouring countryside – he happened to have a stretcher in the entrance made of rough hemp exactly like those used in Ferrara's Sant'Anna Hospital to bear the very ill from one ward to another – as though he were weak in the legs or had a heart ailment or something worse. But the opposite was the case. Agile, calm, he went up the stairs as though borne along by a favourable wind, as though he had wings. It was neither night-time nor was it early morning. Through the porthole fitted above the first set of stairs, the sky appeared as a deep, sunlit blue. It was two or three o'clock on a lovely late-spring afternoon in May or June. The time, just after lunch.

The hotel was full of people. Although there wasn't a living soul on the stairs, outside every facing pair of rooms along the two first-floor corridors, in perfect order, some lit by the oblique rays of the sun, one could see two pairs of shoes, one male, the other female. Heavens, how many shoes! But it wasn't surprising. Even without having spotted all those shoes, it was clear that the ground-floor restaurant was a cover for what was happening up here on the first as well as the second floor. Each room of the hotel, rented out by the hour, hid a couple. They came by car from everywhere, even from as far away as Milan. They talked, they chatted, they whispered, shut two by two into their cramped rooms, each with its wretched porcelain basin, brand new, but already chipped, with its metal bidet, with its wobbly, straw-coloured plywood furniture, with its miserable, skewed bedside rugs and its wan central light. Enough just to lend an ear to perceive the buzz, the hum, part-beehive, part-industrial plant, that secretly ran through the entire establishment from wall to wall and floor to floor.

But at his back, the sound of a dropped, metallic object ringing out on a stair startled him and made him turn abruptly. On the landing below, that of the first floor, was the same dark-suited woman who from the moment he'd entered the dining-room till a couple of minutes ago when he'd left it, had never stopped looking at him. In slippers and a dressing-gown that tightened round her thighs as she crouched to pick up the key that had slipped from her hand, she was staring at him with the same insistence, turning her face three-quarters way round towards him. She was no longer as made-up as before, in fact she was without make-up. She was smiling and staring at him, now far younger-looking, much more like a girl. At last she stood up, the key in her hand. And without

detaching her eyes from his, she stuck her tongue out and began to lick her upper lip.

He could only see the tip. But from the little of it that was visible he could guess that it was thick and short, bestial in its shape as much as in its colour, which was a wine-dark mauve. She was obviously local, perhaps a peasant – black and shining, even her eyes seemed like those of certain animals you find in the country, cows, for example, or horses – one of the many employed by Bellagamba as scullery maids, but really their main job was to entertain solitary and needy customers wanting company in the rooms upstairs. But what did she think she was doing showing him her tongue like that? he wondered as he went on up the stairs, still observing her. Did she think it would impress him? If so, she was mistaken. Seeing her make a show of her tongue like that did nothing but disgust him.

Now, without knowing how or why, he was leaving a bathroom on the second floor and once again she was standing there, waiting for him outside the door, this time adopting a pose, leaning with her back against the landing's handrail with the dressing-gown gathered around her legs to show the thickness of her thighs.

She came towards him and, silently staring up at him, began to touch him. He, while letting her do so and taking in the smell of roast eel that wafted from her hair, told himself that she must work here, in the Bosco Elìceo, and not even as a waitress, but as a scullery maid. In a few moments, the bellowing voice of Bellagamba would sound from the depths of the stairs and order her back down to tend to the stoves or the dishes.

'Give it a rest, will you?' he tried to grumble at a certain point. 'What d'you want from me?'

She continued touching him and smiled to disclose her big teeth with gaps between them.

'Me? Nothing.'

'Can't you see I haven't time? Let me get on – I'm already late.'

'If you'd like,' she insisted, her voice no more than a whisper, 'if you'd like I'll come to your room. What number is it?'

It was hard to tell from her accent where she was from. She hadn't said *vengo* for 'I'll come', but *venghe.* If not from Ferrara, perhaps from Emilia. But *venghe*? Perhaps she was a Southern Italian? Perhaps she'd been evacuated from Naples with her working-class family after the bombardment of 1942 and ended up working as a whore in a Codigoro hotel.

‘I don’t have a room. I’m just passing through.’

‘Well then, you can come to my room. It’s just upstairs, number twenty-four. I’m good at it, you know,’ and again she displayed her tongue. ‘You’ll see what a good time I’ll give you.’

Having said this, she took his hand and hurriedly, making her slippers slap against her naked calloused heels, began to pull him behind her towards the corridor on the right.

Disconcerted, reluctant, he’d followed her. The hand pulling him on was thick and hard and seemed greasy – the hand of someone who works in the kitchen scouring pots and pans with pumice. Yet, no differently from when as a youth he’d visited brothels – and Ulderico never stopped making fun of him for what he called his ‘silliness’ – on this occasion, too, more than any physical repugnance he felt hindered by fear, the fear of venereal disease. Without a condom, he could pick up the clap or even syphilis. If only he’d felt some desire to do what he was about to do! But anyway, how would it be possible at a quarter to eight in the morning and with nothing in his stomach except a sip of coffee? For good or ill, he ought to get rid of her. Two hundred, three hundred *lire* should do the trick. He wasn’t prepared to shell out any more than that.

Next thing, they were in the room, she under the covers, he standing before the window from which could be seen, in the dusky light that pierced the racing clouds, the same things as from the bathroom, the chicken run with the hens, the sports field with its two battered goals facing each other, and so on, with the flat endless countryside all around the village as a backdrop.

Better you don’t keep insisting – he was telling her, without turning to look at her. He hadn’t come to Codigoro to stay there, but to go on to the valleys to hunt. It was eight o’clock. Even if he left immediately, he’d arrive almost three hours late at Volano, where he’d arranged to meet someone who’d be taking him to Lungari di Rottagrande. So could he stay any longer? Clearly not.

‘Wouldn’t you like me at least to try kissing it?’

How annoying! What a bore! All the same he turned and moved away from the window and, unbuttoning his trousers, drew close to her so his belly was at the level of the headboard.

‘What would you be kissing? Can’t you see how small it’s got?’

‘You’re really in a bad way,’ she then murmured, without touching him again, only looking at what he too was observing. ‘There’s nothing there at all.’

5

He awoke with a start, at first not realizing where he was. Although, even before he had stretched out his hand behind his head for the light cord, he was becoming minimally aware of his surroundings. So he'd been asleep. Asleep and dreaming. And the wake-up call? How come no one had bothered? It seemed as though hours had passed since he fell asleep. Perhaps it was already two or three in the morning.

Having switched on the light, he turned on his side to reach for his watch on the shelf of the bedside cupboard and glanced at it. Five forty-five. He rapidly understood, while at the same time registering a sudden wave of anxiety, that he'd only slept for around an hour. Tomorrow was far, far away. Between now and then gaped the immense, almost unbridgeable gulf of an entire night, one of the longest nights of the year.

After ten minutes or so he went down the stairs into the ever-stronger reek of rancid food.

Down in the entrance, Bellagamba, as ever behind the desk, was trying to fix a small radio. The sports news was on, the football scores. He came closer. Leaning over the apparatus, noisy with static, the old Fascist seemed unaware of his presence. He could see well enough that he'd arrived at the least opportune moment. But on the other hand he had to get going right now. And before leaving, he had to pay for his meal and the use of the room.

No chance. However much he insisted, the other man would have none of it. Evidently – he said, his voice raised over the noise of the radio – evidently Signor Avvocato is joking. That would be a fine thing! After all the game he'd given him. So, please, it would be doing him a favour not to talk about money any more. Otherwise, he'd be forced to return all the game, or else draw up a proper account. And then it would be clear which of them was the one in debt.

He turned off the radio.

'More to the point, did you sleep well?' he enquired.

'Not badly.'

‘But only briefly! For how long? An hour and a half at most. You said you wanted to be called at six. I’d have preferred to leave you undisturbed for longer …’

He smiled, with a sly air.

‘I was even thinking of ringing your wife,’ he went on. ‘Just so that with this fog she shouldn’t be worried.’

He beat his forehead with his closed fist. ‘Now, I think of it. Someone telephoned from Cavaglieri the engineer’s house, and said that when you woke up, would you be so kind as to call?’

He narrowed his eyes, and asked:

‘Isn’t he your cousin, the engineer?’

‘But who was it on the telephone?’ he asked, without replying, and without managing to control his voice. ‘Was it the engineer himself?’

‘Definitely not. I don’t think it was his wife either.’

It must have been the housemaid, he thought, the old woman who’d answered this morning.

He stretched his hand out over the desk.

‘Goodbye,’ he said. ‘It’s time I left. And thanks.’

‘If you’d like,’ Bellagamba replied, shaking the hand he’d proffered with evident reluctance, ‘you can even call from here.’

So saying, he extracted the telephone from under the desk.

‘No, but thanks all the same,’ he said, shaking his head with an attempt at a smile.

He covered the back of the other’s hand with the palm of his left hand and then, turning his back, made for the exit.

As soon as he was outside, however, he came to halt, in two minds as to whether to go by foot to Caffè Fetman or to take the car instead. He quickly decided on the latter. A brief walk could only do him good, he told himself, crossing the street, what with that grey, coated tongue he’d recently observed in the bathroom mirror. But it was also the case that, if he walked, he would then have to return and so perhaps bump into Bellagamba again. He could imagine the scene. He, re-entering the square, and there, waiting for him and appearing just on cue behind the steamed-up glass of the entrance to the Bosco Elìceo, the bony face of Bellagamba, carried away with his usual mania of spying, nosing about and digging things up …

Once he’d started up the car, backed out and begun moving at a walking pace towards the square – the fog still so thick it stopped him shifting even into second gear – he felt himself completely invigorated. Just as well. If the Cavaglieri family hadn’t got in touch, he doubted he’d

ever have had the will to phone them. Without anything else as an excuse to stay in Codigoro, all that would have been left would be to set off on his way back to Ferrara. And, by now, he'd already be en route, threading his way through the dense fog, always in first gear, with his eyes narrowed, for mile after mile.

He was imagining the Cavaglieri house: warm, brightly lit, and with the six girls and boys, from the oldest to the youngest, making a noisy ring around their mother and father, already middle-aged, and yet somehow still youthful, still going strong. He couldn't work out why the prospect of dropping into the midst of all that inevitable din and confusion should attract rather than repel him, should, so surprisingly, fill him with hope and desire. Who knows, he embroidered the scene a little more, perhaps later, after the cup of tea and the home-made *ciambella* cake and the glass of sweet Albana (to be slowly sipped with the cake), they would all have pressed him to stay for supper and then, later still, at the end of the meal and the games of *tombola* that would follow it, to stay the night as well, among the whole family, like an old bachelor uncle who'd become curmudgeonly and taciturn from being so long alone, in an improvised bed – perhaps in the bedroom of the youngest – Tonino or was it Tanino? – or in that of the next youngest, Andrea, the one he'd spoken to on the phone at such length and with whom, therefore, things would have been easier, much easier than with any of the other children – to chat in the dark till his eyelids grew heavy. Perhaps, indeed, it would all fall out like this, he told himself. He really hoped so.

He entered the square obliquely and, to steer his way through the fog, he never lost sight of either the small, dark pinnacle of the monument for the Fallen or, barely visible from where he was, the enormous I.N.A. building with its façade full of windows without shutters from which issued a vivid white light, more that of a city than a small town. Finally he arrived right in front of the Caffè Fetman. He was by now so eager to phone that, having switched off the engine and got out of the car, he forgot to lock the door, as was his habit. He only realized this later, when, stepping up on to the pavement, he was about to enter the cafe. He turned round and glanced at the Aprilia. No, he decided, it wasn't worth the trouble. To phone and so on wouldn't take him more than a couple of minutes at most. And in that time, given how deserted the whole place was – the town's inhabitants were all imprisoned in their houses and the others, the visitors, had already left, were already far down the road that would take them home – no one would dream of

stealing anything.

He entered.

The smoke, the steam, the noisy crowd – many of the Bosco Elìceo's customers had relocated there to argue about the scores and the league tables on display on a wall – and the sardonic grin with which the same grimy forty-year-old he'd encountered this morning greeted him from behind the desk; all this in other circumstances would have provoked in him his usual feeling of recoil compounded with a disgust at any physical contact, an annoyance at the din, and a fear of any unpleasant encounters. But in his present state of mind he paid no heed to any of that. He asked for a telephone token. He ordered a Fernet *amaro*. And, meaning to drink it after his phone call, he moved decisively towards the telephone booth at the end of the big room.

He turned on the light. Forgetting to close the door, he dialled the number, twelve.

Almost immediately a woman's voice answered: 'Yes.'

6

It was Cesarina, Ulderico's wife, herself.

Addressing him quite naturally with the informal '*tu*' not just as though they had known each other for years, for ever, but as if they had just been speaking a few hours ago, she immediately reproached him with affectionate familiarity for having waited so long to call them. Good heavens, she was saying, instead of going to Bellagamba's to eat and to have a sleep there as well – lucky that after lunch they'd had the idea of ringing – but why, for heavens' sake, hadn't it crossed his mind to come straight round to theirs? Rico would have been more than happy. And the children as well …

She had a warm, low, drawling voice, slightly querulous, and an accent exactly like Nives'. And although the '*tu*' she'd addressed him with had initially rather disconcerted him, he found it appropriate soon enough. When, shortly, they'd meet again, everything would go smoothly and it would save them both a great deal of embarrassment.

'Just a moment,' he said.

He turned to close the phone-booth door.

'It was past three o'clock,' he added. 'And I didn't want to disturb you.'

Disturb us! Cesarina had exclaimed. For goodness' sake, he shouldn't say that even as a joke. On Sundays and now – on a holiday it was always like Sunday – all of them got up very late, so they'd usually never sit down to lunch before two or a quarter past two. But apart from that, what difference would it make to set an extra place? If the table were set for nine – or ten actually, including the part-time maid – it could just as well be for eleven. And it would take nothing to prepare a bed for him for an after-lunch snooze!

'Thank you,' he had replied. 'Next time I'll feel free to drop in.'

'Good. That's quite right. And the hunting,' she went on, 'how did it go? Did you shoot anything? Soon as Rico heard you'd come here, he put his head out of the window and said that with this weather he reckoned you'd get nothing. But that was just envy,' she'd added,

laughing. ‘Anyway it seemed to me that the weather changed soon after that.’

Since closing the cabin door he could hear her much better. She joined her phrases together with a slight whine like a hungry cat, half-nasal, half-throaty. And she seemed so close now that at one point he thought he could even hear the faint rustling of a sheet. Could she be in bed? The speed with which she’d picked up the phone favoured this notion. It wouldn’t be so outlandish that, even in Codigoro, a telephone extension might be fixed up to the bedside. The phone at the Bosco Elìceo must also have had that sort of extension.

‘Yes, the weather changed,’ he’d confirmed. ‘We took down some forty birds in all.’

He had to receive her breathless exclamations, her congratulations, not, it seemed to him, without a certain air of having seen through him, as if Gavino, who might well have just called before him, had already given a very specific account of what had actually happened. On the other hand – he told himself, again registering the secret gnawing of anxiety, but not yet willing to submit to it, to fall back into it – he could hardly act any differently. Gavino or no Gavino, he wouldn’t want to seem the type to return from the valleys empty-handed. Even at the cost of going back to Bellagamba’s to pick up a brace of ducks to bring as a gift – and God knows what that would cost him, for countless reasons! – he wasn’t in the least inclined to cut that kind of figure.

But, in the meantime, she’d changed the subject. She was asking him about Nives, whom, she said, she hadn’t seen for at least twenty years, and the fault was mainly hers, of course it was, since, lazybones that she was, she’d never wanted to set foot in Ferrara. She asked him about his girl. She asked him how they’d got through the war years, the worst ones, and if it was true – Rico had told her of it – that towards the end of the war they’d had to escape abroad. And he, while replying to each of these questions, began to wonder why she was keeping him so long on the telephone. And Ulderico? Why wasn’t he speaking, except by proxy? Why not pass the phone to him? If they were going to meet anyway, why not just get on with it! Why not put a lid on all the chatter!

Together with these thoughts, he could sense other, very different ones insinuating themselves into his mind. He recalled that, not ten minutes earlier – on the basis of what? – when speaking on the phone that morning to the ancient maid and the young boy, he had imagined what he’d find at the Cavaglieri household – that is, all the family

gathered around, the tea and the *ciambella* cake and the big dinner table flooded with light, and after it was cleared away, the game of *tombola* or rummy in which he'd participate just to hold out until it was bedtime, and so on. But might he not be mistaken? he wondered. Wasn't he fooling himself? Although it would certainly be appealing to play the old misanthropic uncle whom his nephews and nieces would desperately try to cheer up and console with waves of affection and happiness, the sad fact was that this would never be anything other than a role, and a role, besides, that he would find impossible to play.

'And how's Ulderico?' he asked.

'Oh, Rico's fine –' exclaimed Cesarina, with a laugh. 'As are the children, thank God …' It's only that Rico, bored of waiting and waiting, had got tired of staying there doing nothing and at a certain point had gone out – but he'd be back by eight o'clock at the latest. Now, not even the children were home. As she'd felt like she needed a brief lie-down and instead the kids had begun in their usual fashion to kick a football around in the living room – crash, bang – making a terrible racket, at around five she'd sent them off to the flicks with Giuseppina, the wizened old help, to be rid of them all. They wouldn't be back before seven-thirty or eight.'

'And … where was he going?'

'Who? Rico?' and she laughed again. 'Beats me,' she added in dialect, 'perhaps he's off to see his mistress.'

She was joking, he assumed. That, at least, was how it seemed.

'Fine thing that would be,' he said, forcing himself to play along, but in the meantime his throat felt constricted. 'And where does he keep his mistress? Here in Codigoro?'

'Good heavens, no way,' replied the other, suddenly serious.

'Perhaps he'd just gone for a stroll, poor Rico,' she added. 'Or even ended up somewhere playing billiards or cards … Only five minutes ago he'd rung from some bar to check if by any chance you'd called and to ask where the children were. And that almost certainly meant that he'd be going to wait for them at the cinema exit to take them off to church afterwards.'

She emitted one of her strange, sighing whines – a little longer and more marked than usual.

'But where,' she went on, 'where are you calling from?'

'I'm in the square at Fetman's.'

'Just below the house then!' she exclaimed. 'Have you checked carefully that Rico isn't there?'

He hadn't had time to look around. But if he had been there, the barman, given the sort he was, would certainly have let him know.

'I don't think he can be here,' he replied.

'If that's so,' Cesarina said energetically, 'why not come round right away? Go on, please, and I'll get up and make you a nice cup of tea.'

Before he could answer, she began to explain where the house was and how to find it. It was very close to the square, she said, and more or less a hundred metres away from Caffè Fetman, and more specifically in that big ten-storey building which was on the corner of Via della Resistenza. But he should take care. To reach the inner courtyard and the lift, he should enter from the square, since there wasn't even a proper door for 7 Via della Resistenza from the street. The eighth floor, internal apartment number 17, and 18 too. Ring the bell from down below and she'd let him in.

'Thanks,' he said. 'That's great. I'll come right now.'

'D'you mean it? Then I'll put the water on for the tea. Be sure to come.'

'See you soon.'

He hung up, and left the cabin.

He made his way through the crowd, looking around carefully. No, it wasn't likely he'd miss Ulderico, tall as he was – more than six foot if his memory served him. Of course, he could have stowed himself away in some back room to play billiards or cards.

'Have you seen Signor Cavaglieri, the engineer?' he asked the barman as soon as he stopped in front of him.

'No, not today.'

'Thanks.'

He turned round and went towards the door.

'Signor!'

Startled, he stopped and turned.

From behind the counter, through the smoke and the steam from the espresso machine, the barman was staring at him.

'The telephone token,' he said. 'Don't forget about the token and the Fernet.'

IV

1

When he was outside again – strange, the fog had almost completely cleared – the first thing his eyes fell on was the snout of his Aprilia. To see it from the pavement, a little at a tilt and with the windscreen completely dark, it seemed to him even more ancient: a kind of rusty and useless wreck. ‘Go to hell!’ he muttered to himself shrugging his shoulders. His head was once again spinning. It was that shot of Fernet. He should have drunk it slowly and not, as he’d done, knocked it back in one gulp.

He stepped off the pavement and approached the car.

After having locked the right-hand-side door, he raised his eyes to look about. From over the car’s curved roof the I.N.A. building thrust itself up skyward higher than ever, massive and weighty. She’d said a hundred metres? Perhaps because the air was almost entirely fresh and clear the apartment block seemed much nearer. Through many of the small shutterless windows which dotted the façade in alternately projecting rows, half of them overlooking the square, half the Via della Resistenza, he could clearly make out the interiors of the apartments, with people coming and going from room to room, men in shirt-sleeves, women, children. Starting from the ground floor, he counted up to the eighth. There, on the floor that was third from the top, no light could be seen. This meant that the master bedroom looked out on the inner courtyard. Or else that Cesarina had already left the room and switched off the light to go into the kitchen.

He walked round the car and towards the block.

He thought about Cesarina. He couldn’t remember what type of person she was when she was a girl and Ulderico had begun following her around. From her voice, though, he thought he had a good idea of the kind of woman he would be dealing with in a very short while. He’d worked that out right from the start. He only needed to hear her drawn-out, whiny ‘Ye-es’ down the receiver. She must be large, fat and placid, quite the opposite of Nives. One of those good-looking women around forty, who always perturbed him so much that even now, at his age,

every time he met one of them on the street he pretended, even to himself, not to have noticed her, not to have even seen her.

He went over their telephone call, and what she had said, together with the fact that she was alone in the house, gave him the evermore clear-cut feeling of facing something decisive and unavoidable, like a kind of fork in the road. Then the more he thought back over her whole way of behaving towards him, apparently so candid and friendly, the more ambiguous it seemed to him. The *tu* she used with him, for example! But everything else as well, such as her point-blank introduction of the intimacies of their family life – her and Ulderico on Sundays lazing about till late in their big conjugal bed as the children did in theirs – and especially that rustle of bedclothes which had insinuated itself into his ears at a certain point, and other things too, were all equally revealing of her real intentions. And finally, what need had she to let him know, even if it were a joke, that Ulderico had gone out to visit his mistress? Clearly, with this, she had wanted to repeat herself once more, so he should understand properly and have the idea firmly planted in his head that she was alone in the house, quite alone, and that her husband and her kids wouldn't be back for at least a couple of hours. So there was no danger. He could come up without any worry. There was enough time, more than enough! Besides, the apartment had two doors, 17 and 18. Should the need arise she could let him out, unobserved, by the tradesman's exit.

Having arrived at the foot of the block, he stepped on to the pavement, then went under the arches at ground-floor level. His heart was beating fast and his breathing felt constricted. To calm himself down, he went towards the windows of the agricultural machinery emporium and leaned towards the roll-up security grille. In the midst of other machines of smaller dimensions, he recognized through the security grille, through the thick glass pane, a large American tractor, a Caterpillar. In the dim light of the shop he could just discern that it was painted yellow. It was an enormous dark mass. Something shapeless and blind, destitute of any function.

But what a whore she is – he resumed telling himself. What an out-and-out whore!

Living for years and years with a woman of that type, it was no wonder that Ulderico, who held priests no less than rabbis in total scorn, had been reduced to ending his Sundays in church and receiving the benediction. By and by, who knows what a doddery old man, what a wreck, a woman like that would have made him. In a short space of time

she'd furnished him with six children. But now, having sucked him dry, she was evidently busy cuckolding him at full-tilt in front of the whole town, it mattered not a whit with whom: with the barman of Caffè Fetman, the barman and perhaps the owner too, perhaps with Bellagamba, or even – why not? – with that very Gavino Aleotti, who occasionally worked for her husband, and no holds barred. Large, fat and placid. And most of all a whore. What was so wrong with that? she was perhaps thinking as she awaited his arrival. If a worker like Gavino Aleotti figured in her list of men, young and robust as he undoubtedly was, but nevertheless working class, why shouldn't she enrol her husband's cousin from Ferrara as well? The Ferrara cousin was no longer very young, but he was certainly quite as upper class as Rico, if not more so. And then, leaving aside their being related, hadn't the two of them been great pals, not to say inseparable, when they were young, to the extent that up till the moment she became Rico's lover, the mistress he kept, they'd been in the habit of visiting girls together, even of sharing them?

7 Via della Resistenza had a door of modest proportions located at the very far end of the block, there where the arches finished and the usual row of impoverished houses began. He saw it right away, as soon as he'd turned the corner. It had been the small vertical rectangle with the names of the occupants, fixed to the right-hand-door jamb and faintly lit from within, which made him recognize the door from afar.

Picking up his pace, he walked in that direction. He felt exactly like when, as a boy, he'd just taken his high-school exams and, for the first time, accompanied by Ulderico, he'd crossed the threshold of a brothel; he couldn't recall whether in Bologna or Padua. Or when, on those days around the August holiday, he and Ulderico had gone by car to climb in the mountains; and, having arrived at the foot of Mount Pala or Mount Tofana, there was nothing to be done but steel himself, overcome the nausea which inevitably, at that moment, gripped his stomach, and, after being roped together, he had had to follow the others towards a fate which no earthly power could have impelled him, apart from the will of those who were dragging him after them.

He approached the entrance. He bent to inspect the list of surnames. He read CAVAGLIERI, ULDERICO, ENGINEER.

While he was close to the faint reddish light, he glanced at his watch – it was six-thirty – and calculated that the time at his disposal was quite enough to do the needful, and told himself it was true, during those long-ago Sundays when he and Ulderico went out hunting, they had

always ended up first with a big meal and then by going to bed with some local girl, a seamstress, a factory or farm-worker; someone, in short, who was willing, whom he could carry off to La Montina himself, if need be – who could be paid off somehow, and perhaps after having already been passed between the cousins or between their friends, would usually, in the end, be dumped. Suddenly aware that his eyes were on the little hand of his watch, on the sedate, familiar, round, gold-framed face of his Vacheron-Constantin, he realized he was in a state of delirium. He'd been raving, he'd no idea for how long. From that morning, from the moment he had awoken, and then for the entire day, he'd been in this state of delirium. And still now. Codigoro. Those arches … With a sudden lucidity, he asked himself who he was, dressed for hunting, with his fur hat on his head, at that precise moment, under those arches, who on earth was he?

He took off a glove. He touched the button of the bell, not to ring it, but merely to touch it, to feel its texture. Then he stood upright. He walked out from under the arches and, keeping close to the house walls, took the left-hand-side pavement on the opposite side of the square towards the river port.

2

It was seven o'clock, approximately.

Perhaps it would be best to make the most of the fog having almost dispersed, he thought, and instead of wandering around Codigoro staring at the paving stones to return to the square, ring that poor woman Cesarina again to make his excuses, get into the car and, done with it all, set off back to the city. Nevertheless, each time such a scheme occurred to him, he dismissed it at once. So ought he to stay? With what end in view? Before the extreme loss of blood had clouded its eyes, the heron must have felt something similar to him: closed in on every side, without the slightest possibility of escape. With this difference, though, to his disadvantage: that he was fit, quite unimpaired, without having shed a drop of blood, and the dog … well, given the possibility one would go for him, he would have no other option but to face it, with his eyes wide open.

He walked hurriedly, having now reached the end of Via della Resistenza, determined not to turn his gaze towards the freight ships and barges lined up, as they were this morning, along the shore of the river port. But as soon as he became aware of the presence beside him of those motionless, mouse-coloured shapes, so motionless as to seem as if rather than floating they were stuck in the muddy bed of the river, he couldn't resist the temptation to stop and observe them.

Innumerable times as a boy he'd seen boats lined up this way in the canal ports of Cesanatico, of Cervia, of Porto Corsini – in the happy, interminable holidays that they went on back then, before the war and immediately after. And yet from these low broad boats, which instead of being crowned with big, bright, gaudy-coloured sails, had light rigging, transparent as gauze, like lazy wisps of fog, snagged on their grim skeletal masts – from these no sense of joy, of life, or of liberty could be retrieved. From the deck of a barge anchored far from the quay, almost at the centre of the surrounding, mirroring water, two people were moving about, a man and a woman. The man, if his eyes weren't deceiving him, was a corpulent old guy with white hair and a black

Fascist-style pullover; the woman, blonde and very young, wearing a fustian jacket and tight-fitting trousers like blue jeans. They were shouting and gesticulating and running around the cabin whose small window disclosed a faint light, as of a lantern. Their sharp but distant cries, like those of the birds of the valleys, the clacking of their clogs on the decking, their grotesque shadows, enlarged by the yellowish light from the hold … Unable as he was to draw closer, he felt as though he was the spectator at the edge of a vast square of a puppet show being performed for himself alone. It was all pointless. The old man, the villain, would in the end manage to grab hold of the beautiful girl he was chasing, there was no doubt about it. What then? Even if, having clasped and immobilized her, he had stuck a dagger in her trembling throat, what would have happened that was so serious? You only had to observe life's events from a certain distance to conclude that all they amounted to was what they were; in other words, nothing, or almost nothing.

Having passed the diagonal street which to the left led on to the cemetery and to the right to the iron bridge which became the old country road that went on to Migliaro, Migliorino and from there, the fork in the road which led to either Ferrara or Lagosanto and Comacchio, he found himself close to a solitary building. He stopped for a second time. Strange that, over so many years, he'd never paid it much attention. It was a large ancient manor house with a Venetian air, of the kind which was relatively common just on the other side of the River Po, in the lower Polesine district. With its fine, two-storeyed façade which overlooked the canal, therefore south-facing, and with ample space in front to plant trees, this would certainly, he thought, be a fine place for him to buy and live in! He crossed the street to observe the house more closely. But when he realized the decrepit state it had fallen into – the main door replaced by clumsily nailed boards, the windows without panes or shutters, the roof half-stove in – from below through a first-floor window you could even see a patch of sky – he quickly dropped the idea. Disheartened, he imagined the interior, the desolation of empty rooms, fat sewer rats scurrying over the wrecked flooring, the black mouth of the big smashed fireplace on the first floor from which on stormy days terrible gusts of wind would wreak havoc from one end to the other of the big reception room, the splinters of wood – pieces flaked off the rotten shutters, off the doors that would have fallen from their hinges many years before – scattered nearly everywhere, and the dust, the cobwebs, the reek, the darkness. No. To resurrect a carcass like that

would need too much strength of every kind. Perhaps not even Ulderico could have managed, the Ulderico of fifteen years ago when, still young, he had suddenly decided to leave everything behind, get married to an undistinguished woman – the nearest to hand, convert, set up house and family in the depths of the Bassa, and effectively disappear.

He walked away, but at the first crossing took a left, once more entering the thick of the inhabited zone.

He walked down one street after another – dismal little roads flanked by the small one-storey houses of the town's oldest district. He met no one. From the gaps in the closed shutters filtered the pinkish light of impoverished families. All he heard was the odd scrap of sound from radios.

At crossings he lifted his eyes to read the street signs. He knew it: just after the Liberation almost all of the street names had been changed. Narrow alleys had been dedicated to no-lesser figures than Carlo Marx, Federico Engels and Giuseppe Stalin, to Antonio Gramsci and to Clelia Trotti – the famous elementary school teacher and socialist who died of consumption during the winter of 1944 here at Codigoro's local jail – to E. Curiel and so on. The pre-war ceramic signs had not been taken down, but simply covered over with plaster. And on the layer of plaster they had hand-written the new names, with a brush dipped in black paint. Reading them was not an easy task. Time and bad weather were already erasing them. He spelled out: LO MAR, ANTON GRAMSCI, E. CURIEL, USEPPE TALIN, C E IA ROTTI. He filled in the blanks of the missing letters. And didn't walk on until he'd succeeded in doing so.

In Via Antonio Labriola, which must have been just behind the square, he was stopped in his tracks by two discreetly lit ground-floor windows. He drew close to the nearest one, and standing a little to one side, looked inside through the glass.

In front of him was a low-ceilinged, medium-sized, rectangular room – clearly some kind of eating house. The walls hung with pots and copper pans, the sooty fireplace, the two tables each occupied by four card-players who wore hats or berets and had a glass of red wine inches from their elbows left him in no doubt about that. But why was it that those eight players, so silent and motionless, although they resembled in every way the customers in the Bosco Elìceo and Caffè Fetman, seen here, closed in this room behind the pane of glass, should look so strange and out of reach?

He focused his attention on the four who sat at the nearest table. All of them were between thirty and forty; at least three of them looked like

labourers. The one to the right, thin, bony, seen in profile with his cheeks dark with stubble and a hooked nose, might have been a bricklayer. The one in front, in the middle, with a big face and snub nose, with his black beret at an angle and his oil-stained hands, a mechanic. The third, to the left, crouched in the wickerwork chair, hunchbacked in his cyclist's sweater, might also have been a bricklayer, or perhaps a farm-worker, one of those who tends the animals The fourth, by contrast, broad-shouldered, chunky, thick-necked, with a brown Homburg at a rakish angle, was not a workman, that was for sure, but perhaps an employee of the Land Reclamation Company or of the Eridania, or a small landowner. There wasn't a spare seat in the room. Everyone and everything fulfilled a precise function. He felt as though he were standing before a framed painting. Impossible to enter into. There was no place and no space not taken.

What should he do? Where should he go?

He lifted his arm and exposed his watch face to the light. Ten past seven.

He pushed himself back with his chest from the window, and spotted the dark form of Santa Maria Ausiliatrice's apse and its belltower sited across the end of the alleyway. There it was. In church he'd surely find a pew to rest on. He could sit apart, in a corner, so as not to be seen, should Ulderico and his children arrive. Crossing the threshold would be the only moment he'd run any risk. But was it at all likely that he'd meet the Cavaglieris as he was entering? In any case, it was worth being careful.

He would never have guessed the church's interior was so vast. With a single nave and its unadorned rough-cast walls, and its floor almost entirely filled by two rows of pews divided by an aisle which led to the main altar, it made him think of a cinema, an empty out-of-hours cinema where nothing was showing. There was hardly a soul. Only the priest and a novice down there by the altar, busy preparing something, and four or five old women hunched here and there in the pews.

Halfway up the side wall opposite the entrance he noticed a chapel, the only one: a half-dark niche containing nothing but a large black crucifix carved in wood. It was there he'd find a place for himself. Should it prove necessary, he'd withdraw to the back of the chapel. On tiptoes, he made his way there.

Once he was seated, he began to scrutinize the distant, incomprehensible activities of the priest and the novice scuttling between the main altar and the sacristy. He still felt far from at ease.

Having taken off his cap, his head felt cold. Besides, the proximity of the crucifix, of that blackened, nailed corpse, disturbed and intimidated him.

He yawned. How many people could the church seat?

He began to count the pews. Starting with the first row and moving back, he counted up to forty. Each row of pews would easily accommodate some twenty people. Two times four is eight. So it would seat a congregation of eight hundred.

He yawned again. A good half of the pews, especially those towards the front, closest to the main altar, bore a miniature white sign above with the usual names – Callegari, Callegarini, Benazzi, Tagliati, Putinati, Pimpinati, Borgatti, Felletti, Mingozzi, Bottoni, etc. – more or less the same ones you'd find among the poorest workmen and labourers in the surrounding country. And the Cavaglieris? Did they, too, have their own church pew? It was almost worth the bother of going to check.

He realized he was stepping on something, and peered down. Some paper. It looked like a newspaper.

He leaned down, picked it up and straightened it out.

It wasn't a newspaper, but some Catholic propaganda print-out. On the first page there was only a thickly inked woodcut. It showed a hand tightly squeezing some ripe olives. Its rough, knotty fingers with enormous nails were dripping with oil. Atop the image in spaced-out capital letters it read: TAKE NO THOUGHT FOR THE MORROW.

He opened the sheet and smoothed it out.

There was a great deal to read within. The font and point size kept on varying to keep the readers on their toes, and even the layout changed every now and then. Sometimes the lineation suddenly shifted to short lines centred and arranged in columns as if they were verses of a poem.

'Have you ever closely observed a mole?' he read, staring at the top of the sheet and narrowing his eyes to decipher the tiny italics of the first lines. 'Its forepaws are like spades it uses to dig the earth before it, as you might with a spoon. It uses its back legs to push its body forwards. Its head is like a wedge, its nose like a pointed chisel, and both have been created so as not to be broken. Its tiny eyes are almost entirely hidden by its fur, and its outer ears likewise.

'Do you think it made itself that way, adapting its body to a life underground? And why have other animals that live in a similar way adapted differently? Yes, because of God. But would a God so infinitely great concern himself with such insignificant creatures?

'Don't listen to the voice of atheistic materialism! But rather observe

all that surrounds you with the good, clear eye of a child of God. Then you will agree with St Augustine who attests: “God takes care of every creature He has made as if it were the only one in the world, and of all as if each one were unique.”

‘There are, however, different kinds of care.

‘You take care of your shoes, of your hunting dog, of your parrot, of your potted geranium on the windowsill, of your radio, of your motorbike. And you say to your little girl “Careful not to fall!”, “This draught will give you a cold!”, “Are you hungry?”, “I run to see why she’s crying …” And you wrap her tightly in your arms to dry her tears.

‘In truth, of all His creatures, God has a very special care for Man, whom He loves with a father’s heart.

‘After having provided for your benefit the sun, fruits, stones to build your houses, leather and wool from animals to clothe you, grass and flowers to delight you, He bends down over you to hear the beating of your heart, to calm it with the utter certainty He gives your life.

‘He tells you: “Take no thought for food or raiment. Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin, and yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these …”

‘Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the fire, shall He not much more think of you! He always provides for your good, be assured, even when things do not turn out as you would have wanted.’

He had arrived at the bottom of the third page.

‘The parrot?’ he wondered. ‘What has the parrot to do with all this?’

He turned to the next page. Empty. There was nothing more to read.

3

He went out by the same side door he had come in by. And almost immediately, having taken a few steps in the dark down the evil-smelling little alley running alongside the church, he found himself once again in the square, beside the sacristy.

Once more he came to a halt.

Gradually widening like a chalice or a funnel, the square spread itself before him in all its enormity. To the right, nearby, the shadowy mass of the local Fascists' ex-headquarters. To the left, no less tall but set further back, the I.N.A. building, with its dozens of brightly lit windows. In the background, at what suddenly seemed to him a vast distance, so even the thought of crossing it on foot filled him with fatigue, with unbounded boredom, three points of light shone out: two of an equally dull yellow from the cafes opposite each other, the Fetman and the Moccia, and one of a shop window which he had only just noticed, adjacent and to the right of the low central block of the Trade Union hall, and ablaze with the same bright white light of an industrial establishment in full swing as that which flooded the square from the I.N.A. building. There was no fog. During the last half hour the air had instead become crystal clear, so that it allowed him to see every detail not only of the monument to the Fallen in the middle of the square, but also, behind that, the minuscule bedbug-like carapace of the Aprilia's roof. He sniffed the air. The smell of urine and incense lingered in his nostrils. Mingling with these, and the usual smell of the valleys, was a new odour: of burning, of roasted chestnuts. He looked around in search of the humble iron brazier replete with charcoal which must have been nearby, but without success. Who knows where it was.

He moved on.

He walked slowly, letting his legs carry him towards the centre of the square, while the surrounding space and everything within it, the monument to the Fallen, the Fascist ex-headquarters, the I.N.A. building, gradually assumed a different, a transformed aspect. Even the Aprilia was changing its appearance. No longer the shell it had seemed just

before. One could see the double back-window with its trapezoid frame. And, within a moment or two, it would be possible to read, white on a black background, the numbers on the Ferrara licence plate.

He headed towards Caffè Fetman. However, having covered three-quarters of the distance, and noticing a group of customers leaving the premises, who then stopped to chat in front of the entrance – four of them, all wearing cloaks, who seemed to be paying attention to the Aprilia, and discussing it – so as not to have to get into the car beneath their gaze, he preferred to move to the right, towards the brightly lit window beside the Trade Union hall. Some time before, he'd figured out what it was – the taxidermist's workshop which Bellagamba had mentioned. It didn't matter. Without now feeling the least bit repelled by the idea, he allowed his legs to lead him, one step after another, to a yard or so from the big glass window.

He stopped there, fascinated.

Hunting rifles, belts full of cartridges, fishing rods, nets, lark mirrors, decoys for the valley, gumboots, woollen fabrics as well as fustian and velvet, and of course the stuffed animals, mainly birds, but there was also a fox, a marten, some squirrels, the odd tortoise: full to the brim, with things strewn in what only seemed to be disorder, the window shone before him like a small, sunny, self-sufficient universe, parallel but unreachable. He was well aware that the pane of glass between him and the interior was what rendered it so. And since the pane of glass, so spotlessly clean it seemed invisible, reflected a part of his own image – barely a shadow, it was true, but still annoying – in order to be completely rid of this faint residual shadow and to pretend the glass itself wasn't there, he drew even closer, almost touching the window with his forehead, so that he sensed a coldness colder than the evening air.

Beyond the windowpane, silence, absolute immobility, peace.

He observed, one by one, the stuffed animals, all of them resplendent in their death, more alive than when they lived.

The fox, for example, which occupied the middle of the window display horizontally, between a pair of matching gumboots standing upright, and a half-opened Browning rifle, was twisting its snout to the side, gnashing its teeth as if in the act of turning it had ended up there in that instant; and its yellow eyes, full of hatred, its bright white teeth, its flaming red maw, its thick and luminous russet-blond fur, its bushy overgrown tail, all gleamed with an overbearing, almost insolent health, preserved by a magic spell from any assault, both now and in the future.

Even the squirrels, placed where you'd least expect to find them – there was one whose neat little head, and nothing more, peeked out of a fine leather game bag – although motionless, they still managed to express all the sly grace, the gleeful agility of their nature, like that of Walt Disney's dwarves, but with something more, something extra, perhaps related to their being there, safe, and for ever, separate, behind the thick glass. In the violent, convergent light of the lamps their black beady eyes shone joyously, feverishly, devilishly, with knowingness and irony.

It was towards the birds, however, that his gaze kept on returning.

The ducks, at least a dozen of them in a compact group, were squashed into the fore-stage of the little theatre, so close it seemed he could have touched them, and calm at last and without fear, no longer forced to keep to the heights, suspended on their short trembling wings in the still, treacherous air. The birds of prey, by contrast, with the exception of an eagle owl perched in a central and dominant coign, were further off, in a long row, on the shelf of a kind of partition which formed the back and sides of the window display. Reading the brass labels at the foot of the fake ebony pedestals on which each of these birds was posed upright, he recognized, one by one, a kestrel, a buzzard, a peregrine, an osprey, a sparrowhawk … These birds were also vivid, and shone as if polished with a vitality which ran no risk of decay, but most of all they had become far more lovely than they'd been when they were breathing and blood ran fast in their veins – he alone, perhaps, he thought, was in a position truly to *understand* the perfection of their final, imperishable beauty, to fully appreciate it.

At one point, the better to see the green on a mallard's feathers, he had to draw back a fraction. Immediately, reflected in the pane, he once again saw the shape of his own face.

He then tried to look at himself as he had that same morning in the bathroom mirror. And while he was rediscovering, beneath his fur cap, the same features he awoke to every day – the receded hairline, the three horizontal furrows across his brow, the long, fleshy nose, the heavy, tired-looking eyelids, the soft, almost womanish lips, the dint in his chin, the cheeks blurred with stubble – but still such as to appear veiled, distant, as though just a few hours had been enough to sprinkle the dust of years and years over them, he felt a secret thought slowly forming within him, as yet confused but still rich with mysterious promise, a thought that would free him, and save him.

4

If merely imagining himself dead overwhelmed him with such a sudden wave of happiness, he reasoned, well then, why not actually kill himself? And why not as soon as possible? No, he should do it this same night, in his room, with the Browning or the Krupp. And he already knew exactly how.

He drove on down the road to Ferrara in the cold, clear night lit by the moon.

A little before the Eridania sugar refinery and the Land Reclamation Office he had stopped at an A.G.I.P. petrol station to buy five hundred *lire*'s worth of petrol and to have the windscreen cleaned, and now, back in the car, having decided what he had decided, he found it even easier to identify with the stuffed animals in the Cimini shop in Codigoro. Once in a while he shook his head. How stupid, how ridiculous and grotesque, life, precious life, became once you saw it through the shop windows of a taxidermist! And how much better, straightaway, he felt at the mere thought of finally being done with all that tedious back-and-forth business of eating and defecating, drinking and urinating, sleeping and waking, of making trips and staying put, which life consisted of! Perhaps, for the first time in his life, he began to think of the dead without any fear. Only they, the dead, counted for something, only they were truly alive. It would take a couple of years to be reduced to nothing more than a skeleton – he'd read that somewhere. After which, the dead experience no further change for ever. Clean, hard, very beautiful, they then became like precious stones or the noble elements. Immutable, and so, eternal.

The nearer he got to Ferrara, the lighter and happier, even at times frivolous, his thoughts were. He kept on bursting out laughing.

The fleeting vision of La Montina to the left of the road, on the other side of the Volano stretch of the Po, brought Nives to mind. Immediately, he began to wonder with amusement what would happen to La Montina in a month, or a month and a half, when Nives would establish contact for the first time in person with the property and its

employees. He saw the whole scene in splendid detail: the ladylike frown of the widow and heiress, the pernickety pout of her lips in her effort to speak her most fluent Italian, the kowtowing of Benazzi, the overseer, hoping to keep his job, the caps in hand of the farm labourers and cowherds, disposed, at this stage, given the change of political climate, to wipe the slate of the recent past utterly clean, their faces a blend of the sly, the respectful and the contrite. As regards this – here he broke into a good-natured grin – would Nives come to La Montina alone or else accompanied by the faithful Prearo in the Aprilia? That the two were in cahoots, and had been for quite some time, he alone had been blithely able to ignore, thanks to his inveterate tendency to register nothing that might put his tranquillity at risk. So then, why not? Given the solemnity of the occasion, it was likely that the excellent accountant should now and then double up as chauffeur, remaining, for the entire duration of the managerial site inspection, discreetly apart yet respectfully *à côté*. Oh, that would really be a scene to enjoy from the beginning to the end. What a shame to miss it! On the other hand, wasn't it already a satisfying enough prospect to imagine it all and, since, for good or ill, he was the husband, to arrange things so that it should actually take place?

He was so detached from himself and from the world, so relaxed and serene, that just a little way down the road, at the entry to Tresigallo, the name of the town written in big letters on a house wall at the edge of the built-up area, struck him as though he had never set eyes on it before. Tresigallo. What on earth could be the source of such a name? That very evening he must remember to look it up in *Frizzi* or *Treccani*. They would surely furnish him with some information on the topic.

All the while, he was slowly driving through the small town, which also looked dark and deserted. He could clearly recall, some fifteen years ago, sometime around 1930, the Fascist government had suddenly decided to transform this small farming centre, one of the least significant in the province, into the site of a propaganda exercise for Ferrarese agriculture. And right on cue, as it happened, the car's headlights revealed: first a vast marble-fronted barrack-like hall similar to the Fascist ex-headquarters at Codigoro, then an endless square, at the centre of which stood, high above the black basalt plinth that formed its base, a statue in Lazio travertine, and beyond it a large building that resembled the new station in Florence, and constructed, as a still perfectly legible inscription above the entrance proclaimed, for the working of hemp and its derivatives. It was clear that none of this now

served any purpose whatsoever. The grand hall with its imperial air, the statue of the gladiator with its naked and muscular buttocks, in all likelihood representing Fascism on the march; the building intended for the manufacture of autarchic fabrics: under the moon, they were all revealed as senseless, just pure and simple stage-settings, and the life of the town seemed, more than ever, as it once had been, limited to the small circle of peasant houses huddled on one side of the parish church. He left by the opposite side to the built-up area. 'Farewell and safe travels', he muttered, accelerating along the wide road bordered by trees which led straight to Ferrara. During the course of the day this was the second time he'd wished farewell to something. This morning to those poor ducks, and now to Tresigallo. Once again he broke into a laugh. But it was apt, in the end. In the end, Tresigallo would have a future before it. Even with a much narrower gauge, the small town would still keep going. He, by contrast – and he thought this without a shadow of sadness, no, rather, with calm good humour – where on earth was he going to in his car?

The Prospettiva's Arch appeared in front of the bonnet at exactly nine-twenty. Before leaving Codigoro he'd remembered to phone home. From that phone booth in Caffè Fetman he'd exchanged a few words with the cook, Elsa: just to say that he was leaving, and meant to arrive within just less than an hour and could she please tell Romeo on the entry-phone to open the gates in plenty of time. He himself had made perfect time. Had Elsa carried out his instructions? Given the hour, and the supper to prepare, perhaps not – she could well have forgotten. In a moment he'd find out. It was no big deal if the gates were shut. He'd just peep his horn twice.

The moon lit up the entire length of Via Montebello from the Giovecca crossing right down to the distant, massive, greyish granite arcade sited at the entrance to the Jewish Cemetery. Via Mentana, however, was almost in darkness. As soon as he'd turned the corner, he switched the headlights on full beam. The gates were wide open. In front of them, Romeo was standing, waiting calmly at the curb, with his beret, his grey woollen scarf wrapped round his neck and his hands sunk in his trouser pockets.

He slowed down, taking a quick look in the rear-view mirror. He manoeuvred on to the left side of the road, and indicated. He turned right. Then, again accelerating, he confidently steered through the gates and stopped in his usual spot right in front of the porch.

He left Romeo to shut the gates and waited for his old parchmenty

face to appear framed in the car's side window, on the other side of the glass. How come Signor Avvocato had decided not to get out of the car? Barely concealed, his bafflement was comic and, at the same time, moving.

He lowered the window halfway down.

'Would you open the inner gate for me, please?' he asked quietly, gesturing to the space in front of him.

The other looked at him wide-eyed.

'Do you want to park the car in the yard?' he asked in the slow Italian he used for important occasions.

'I do,' he said, smiling. 'It doesn't seem that cold now.'

'Would you have stuff to take in?' Romeo asked, reverting to dialect.

He gathered he was alluding to the spoils of the hunt. Though it looked like he didn't have much faith in that. His thin, violet lips had stretched into a furtive grin.

'No, far from it. I didn't shoot a thing.'

Through the windscreen he saw him make his way towards the gate. It was obvious he disapproved. He could tell from the exaggerated curve of his back as he tried to open the gate. Of necessity, in a few hours' time, what with one thing and another, he'd be making a fair bit of extra work for him. So he ought to treat him well, and keep him happy.

He drove the car through to the yard.

'And how is your daughter doing?' he asked after he'd got out of the car. 'Did she call round this afternoon?'

Yes, she had come, Romeo confirmed. They'd both showed up, she and her husband.

He added nothing more, and made a grimace. He'd probably had to shell out some more money, he thought. But in any case what could he do about it? It wouldn't do to offer to reimburse him. Apart from the fact that he only had a few hundred *lire* on him, it would be too tricky a discussion to get embroiled in. And, as for having a talk with the son-in-law, that William, he didn't think that was something he could promise. Making a promise he knew he couldn't keep would have been distinctly dishonest on his part. Dishonest and stupid both.

He climbed the stairs at a fair rate, with the Browning and the Krupp slung over each shoulder. But, having arrived upstairs, he stopped at the doorway. He had clearly heard the whining tones of Nives coming from the dining-room. Seeing as they were already seated at the table, perhaps it would be convenient all round to show his face at once. And later, if possible, he could go to his room for a moment to wash his

hands and face.

He walked across the polished, creaking parquet, half-opened the door in front of him, and peeked his head round the side.

'I'm back,' he announced, while Lilla, his mother's poodle, uttered its usual little stifled woof. 'Good evening.'

He had taken them by surprise.

Nives and his mother were at either end of the table, Rory and Prearo, the accountant, in between, facing each other: all of them stared at him with startled looks, motionless as statues. Strange. Strange and comic. Was it possible that Elsa, who had indeed warned Romeo of his coming, had neglected to tell Nives, as well, about his phone call? No, that couldn't be, he realized as he noticed that a fifth place had been set beside Rory.

He came forwards a step.

'My respects,' murmured Prearo, half-rising from his seat and jerking back his sweaty face.

'Please don't get up.'

'Aren't you going to sit down?' Nives said in a complaining tone. 'Go on, do, it's late.'

Just at that moment, Elsa came in through the other door that opened on to the kitchen and the office. She was balancing the oval dish of boiled turkey meatloaf, and she, too, on seeing him, came to a sudden halt.

He took them all in with a single circular glance: Nives, Rory, his mother with the little black, curly-haired poodle curled up on a seat beside her, Prearo, Elsa. He felt incredibly rich, generous, disposed to be bountiful: overtaken by a kind of inebriation. Yet he knew, how well he knew it! All it would have needed was for him to decide to stay alive for one more day, for just a single day, and that happiness, which for an hour he had carried shut tight within him like a treasure, to suddenly dissolve and for him to experience once again, even towards his daughter, sitting there, staring up at him with her beautiful dark and wild blue eyes, the same old bitter sense of alienation, almost of repulsion, that had always stopped him feeling that she was his, that he loved her. That was it, he told himself, only by dying was he able to love her! And she? Would she remember him, her father, when she was grown up? What he looked like? Almost certainly not. He hoped for this on her behalf with all his heart. In his present state, this was the only gift he was able to give her.

'I'm going to my room for a moment,' he said.

5

He, more than any of them, believed he was going to return in a moment. But after he'd left the dining-room, and had begun to walk down the long L-shaped corridor which led from the entrance to his bedroom, he suddenly understood that he would not return, not even to announce that he'd decided to skip supper. To stay on his own, to undress, to think. To prepare himself. Nothing weighed on him; there was nothing else he desired.

He entered his room. He switched on the central light. He undid the cartridge belt and draped it on a chair. He slid the two rifles from his shoulders, and leant them against the wall beside the glass cabinet. He took off his jacket, hanging it on the wheeled clothes-horse. He sat on the side of the bed. He bent down to unlace his boots. He straightened up. He switched on the small lamp on his bedside table. At last he stretched himself out, his hands entwined behind his neck. And he was lying thus, staring at the ill-lit ceiling, overcome by the feeling of extraordinary well-being which lying supine on the bed, on his own bed again, gave him, when he heard someone knocking at the door.

'Come in,' he said.

It was Elsa – he knew from her smell, a blend of cooking and soap.

'What is it?' he asked without moving, and closing his eyes.

The *riso in brodo* is getting cold, the girl replied. If Signor Avvocato didn't come down soon, then later, when it was reheated, it wouldn't taste nearly as good.

He knew where she was. Just beyond the threshold, her hand resting on the latch. He *saw* her hand: big, with swollen and grazed fingers, but appealing, not in the least unpleasant.

'No. I won't be coming down,' he replied. 'I'm not hungry. Would you tell the Signora that?'

He lifted his body halfway up, leaned on his elbow and gave her a smile.

'Also, I'm too tired to eat.'

In the half-dark, in the lamplight that lit her healthy cheeks faintly

from below, he saw her flush. Where was she from? Ah yes, from Chioggia, or rather Sottomarina di Chioggia. Blonde, rosy, sturdy, with blue eyes, just like Irma Manzoli, she was forever blushing, and he always found women who blushed easily attractive.

'Is there nothing you need?' she asked him.

He was about to say no. But an idea occurred to him. What if, by chance, there wasn't any string in the house? That would be a real disaster. To have the wherewithal to shoot himself, he absolutely needed some.

'Do you happen to have any string in the kitchen?'

'Any string?'

Poor girl. It was understandable she should stare at him like that, caught between wonder and irony.

'Before going off to sleep,' he explained, 'I'd like to give the rifles a bit of a clean.'

'I think we might have. But how long should it be?'

'A couple of metres would do.'

'I'll go and see straightaway.'

'Thanks.' He smiled again. 'Thanks a lot.'

Having heard the door shut, he got to his feet, took off his wristwatch, placed it on the bedside table and walked into the bathroom.

First of all he turned on the bath taps, leaning over the bath to gauge the temperature of the water accurately. And as he gradually undressed – he knew that what he wanted was to be undressed, to wash himself completely clean, to shave, and later he might even try to empty his bowels – as he gradually took off his pullover, his flannel shirt, his string vest and then, in order, the thick wool stockings, his short socks, the corduroy trousers, the long woollen underpants, the short cotton briefs – he didn't stop thinking about how he would shoot himself, forcing himself to plot out every smallest detail of the operation.

In the countryside, he'd often been told, farm-workers generally did it in this way: they propped the gun's butt on the ground and then, holding the barrel tightly in their hands, pushed the trigger down with their toe extended. He, however, intended to do it differently. He would take the string, knot one end to the trigger and the other to something solid and fixed, perhaps a bath tap. Then, having made himself quite comfortable, in a seated position, he would position the barrel. No, the string would be a decidedly clever device. Being seated, he could shoot himself in the chest, the throat, his mouth or in the middle of his forehead – wherever he chose. And in the bathroom, it hardly mattered

if he made a mess of the floor.

He climbed over the edge of the bath, turned off both taps, and stretched out full-length in the lukewarm water.

All that remained to be decided – he returned to his thoughts, assisted by the sudden silence – if anything did, was the question of which weapon to use. The Browning or the Krupp? But while he was posing the question, he already knew that the Browning would not be appropriate. He wouldn't be using that. Better the Krupp. The double barrel was far more reliable. With that gun, the risk of being left half-alive, of slowly bleeding out, was minimal. If he managed to calculate exactly the right lengths of string, one for each trigger, he would be blasted by both shots together, in the same instant. He'd not be aware of a thing.

He soaped himself from head to toe. He rinsed himself. He got out of the bath. He dried himself. He shaved. He sterilized his face with a dab of cologne. He carefully tidied his hair, using brilliantine, brush and comb. Finally, having put on his pyjamas and his beige-coloured dressing-gown and slippers, he went back into his bedroom.

Elsa had brought the string. A whole ball of it. She had left it in plain sight on the middle of the bed. He took the ball in his hand and examined it. Excellent. The string wasn't too thick. Thin but sturdy, the best for the job. For tying a knot with, it would be perfect.

He leaned his elbow on the bedside table beside the Vacheron-Constantin and the Jaegar, and then once more lay down in the bed, under the covers, his hands laced behind his head as before. He wouldn't leave any note. Not a single line. What would be the point? There were no debts left to pay or to collect. As for the cemetery, even there, everything was in order. Prearo had always taken care of his annual contribution to the Jewish Community, with regular payments on behalf of himself and his mother. So no one could raise any objections. The President of the Community, that Cohen fellow, who, ever since his marriage, had stopped greeting him, never to resume, would find himself with his hands tied.

He remained there, thinking.

Towards midnight he got out of bed, went to the door, opened it and walked into the corridor.

Not every night, it was true, but quite often, he would go to visit his mother at more or less this time, especially if he'd come home just before or shortly after supper, and had gone to his room to read the papers in peace, or to check some accounts. It was a very long-established habit. For that reason, it wasn't impossible that his mother,

troubled not to see him come in, might take it into her head to burst in on him at two or three o'clock when he'd be most in need of being alone, of not being disturbed.

He walked down the corridor, past the entrance, the dining-room, the two adjoining drawing-rooms which had been left unheated for a couple of years and had now effectively been re-assigned as a storage room and a larder. He moved, then, from one side of the apartment to the other, opening and shutting doors, switching lights on and off, and without worrying whether the parquet creaked. If Nives, from her bedroom, or Elsa, in her little room next to the kitchen, should hear him pass, all the better. All the better that tonight everything should seem perfectly normal to them as well, no different in any respect to every other night.

6

The inner happiness he felt gave a spring to his tired legs, poise and precision to his every gesture, and calm to the beating of his heart. It was truly a treasure he was guarding within. Huge, inexhaustible, yes, and yet something to be kept secret all the same, hidden from everyone in the world. His whole joy, his whole peace derived from the certainty that he was its sole possessor.

His mother's bedroom was the last, the furthest-away room in the apartment, repurposed from a small reception room which, in the time of his grandfather Eliseo, and his grandmother Vittoria, had served exclusively for billiards. But after he had walked through the vast and chilly darkness of the second of the ex-drawing-rooms, filled with dim presences without form, there he was at the door, lowering the latch, and opening it a crack.

'May I?' he asked as usual.

'Oh, it's you!' he heard exclaiming in reply the familiar, querulous, wavering voice.

He entered, shut the door and, in the unexpected warmth, walked to the bed, which was positioned at the far side of the room, then stretched out his hand to stroke Lilla, who, having delivered her ritual little harmless yelp, had immediately curled up again at her mistress's side, level with her hip. He behaved as he ever did, repeating the same acts, the same motions and preparing to say and to hear the exact same habitual phrases.

But for once he felt happy, and his mother caught his mood from the start.

Instead of beginning with her usual complaints, mainly directed at Nives, she lay there contemplating him with a satisfied air and in silence.

'How handsome you are,' she said at last.

'Me handsome?' he parried. 'You're joking.'

'But you are. Let your mother be the judge! You should go hunting more often. Get out in the sunshine and the wind, breathe a bit of fresh

air now and then as you used to and I'm sure it would do you a world of good. See what a fine colour you have.'

'Perhaps you're right,' he replied, bowing his head. 'I really ought to.'

'Good boy,' she said, with a smile. 'I saw it straightaway, you know, as soon as you came in, that your whole face looked different. But how come,' she went on, still smiling and speaking in lowered tones, 'you didn't want anything to eat, not even a little bowl of soup? It was very good.'

'I'm sure it was. But the truth is, I ate very late today, so I wasn't hungry.'

'What a shame. Your wife wanted to make the meatloaf herself, and I have to admit that now she's really learned how to, and so that was delicious as well … and where did you go to eat?'

He told her where.

'Who knows what gruesome stuff you'll have had to swallow,' she exclaimed, with a grimace of disgust. 'Let's hope it doesn't make you ill. But did the underwear at least keep you warm and dry enough?'

While he replied that the woollen underwear had indeed proved fortuitous, and placidly told her what he'd eaten at lunch, he was observing her closely. In bed, with two linen-covered pillows propping her up, with that graceful, loosely knitted, blue woollen shawl which covered her shoulders and breast, all so clean, the soft, cotton-wool-like hair a fraction whiter than the frail parchment of her face, she too looked beautiful. Perfect.

'You're looking beautiful yourself,' he said. 'My compliments.'

She burst out laughing. Childishly flattered, she arched back against the pillows, joined together her little, knotty hands covered with veins, and shut her eyes. How old was she? he wondered. She must be around eighty, almost double his own age. All the same her arteriosclerosis was helping to turn her into a child again – even more of a child than Rory was.

When she opened her eyes again, she wanted to know how the hunt had gone.

'I guess you won't have shot anything,' she said.

She had assumed a disheartened and at the same time anxious air, as if all she wanted was to be proved wrong. Why not make her happy? She looked as though she needed to hear a fairy tale, and he was willing to tell her one. More than willing.

He replied that she was mistaken, he'd brought down more than forty ducks and coots. Only rather than carry them all back home, he'd

preferred to give them away. He'd given them all to Ulderico.

She was slow to catch his meaning.

'Ulderico who?' she asked.

He tilted his head towards Via Montebello, then added in a lowered tone: *'Cavaglieri?'*

She nodded.

He waited for her to emerge from her bewilderment and reorganize her memory. Yes, him, he confirmed. As they'd recently exchanged a couple of phone calls, and he'd always been so kind, and as he was passing through Codigoro, he'd decided to pay him a visit.

Now she was on the alert, as though she'd shed twenty years.

'At his home?' she whispered.

'Yes, at his home.'

'And where is his home? In the countryside?'

'No, in the town itself. Right on the main square.'

'Did you see his wife as well?'

'His wife and his children too.'

'His children! How many does he have?'

He showed her with his fingers.

'Six!' his mother exclaimed, clapping her hands. 'Good heavens above, what a clan!'

'And his wife –' she continued, after a pause, again in a stifled voice, wrinkling her forehead with the effort to remember – 'what's his wife like? Did you speak to her?'

'I certainly did. I phoned and went round. They offered me a nice cup of tea … they even wanted me to stay for dinner.'

He saw her shake her head, give an ample sigh, then throw herself back against the pillows once more. Her eyes, always a bit too damp, had filled with tears. What was she thinking about? What had got into her? For the love of God, let it not be any sadness.

To distract her, he told her about the children. The two girls were almost grown up now. Of the four boys, all likeable, good-looking lads, three of them had started playing football in the hallway while he was there.

'What a hullaballoo that must have been!' his mother said with a laugh, still in tears.

'It was, rather.'

'And what are they called, those little ones?'

'I'm not sure. Clementina, Tonino … or Tanino, I didn't catch all the names. There's also one called Andrea.'

Here they were interrupted by Lilla who, suddenly springing up, began to bark. She had extraordinary hearing, as he'd noticed on other occasions. It was enough, say, for a lorry to pass down Via Giovecca and she would leap up in protest like a jack-in-a-box.

'Be good!' his mother told her off. 'Down, you stupid thing, and go to sleep!'

When she was sure the dog had gone back to her slumbers, she seemed, all of a sudden, to have forgotten everything they'd been speaking of till then.

She started talking, as usual, without a pause, about Lilla being so clever, that if one fine day she should start to say 'Mamma' no one who knew her would be in the least bit surprised; about Nives, fine woman, with a good head on her shoulders, an untiring worker, salt of the earth, but sometimes she could be a bit brusque, how shall we say, a bit too coarse; about Prearo, the accountant, who was saying, just this evening, at supper, that things were settling down in the political world, and that was perfectly borne out by the sense of great calmness she felt around her, the same, it seemed to her, as she'd felt in the time she had spent at that convent in Florence when the Germans were here; about Rory, poor little mite, who just today had hidden a little Christmas wish under her napkin, so well written it was, both in terms of handwriting and clear expression, and so affectionate; about a pipe for the drinking water which was leaking more every day, and how he really ought to chase Romeo so he finally attended to it; about a phone call she had received, at five o'clock, from her friend Carmen Scutellari, one of the Scutellaris of Via Terranuova, a call that had ended with their mutual promise to meet up in the next few days … It was a continuous flow of murmured words, a kind of chirping which ended, after at least twenty minutes, with an umpteenth sigh and a 'Hmm!' which was happy and satisfied.

For her, too, everything would reach the right conclusion, he thought, as he began to get to his feet. For the little that was left of her life, things would always turn out well. Regardless.

He leant down to kiss her on the forehead.

'Bye,' he said. 'Goodnight.'

'Yes, my dear. Goodnight to you as well.'

He turned his back on her, crossed the room and reached the door.

With his hand on the latch, he turned to look at her. Surrounded by everything that was most her own and most dear to her – the little adoring dog almost touching her, then the family photographs, the heraldic arms of the House of Savoy on parchment in a silver frame, the

many-coloured phials of medicine, the leather spectacles case, the tiny golden parallelepiped of her Zenith alarm clock, the books on one bookcase, the last few years' issues of *Vie d'Italia* on another, the *Giornale dell'Emilia* open on the green damask quilt, level with the little bundle of black fur that was Lilla, and so on and on – she gave him a warm smile. White, down there, wrapped in her cocoon of light.

'Goodnight,' he repeated.

'Goodnight, my dear Edgardo.'

THE BEGINNING

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fn1 *sgnór avucàt*: Ferrarese dialect for *signor avvocato*, the respectful title given to a lawyer.

fn2 Alcide De Gasperi (1881–1953) was the founder of the Christian Democracy Party and prime minister of Italy from 1945 to 1953.

fn1 *tupìn*: Ferrarese dialect for ‘mouse’, but here, because of the colour of the uniforms they wore, referring to a member of the local Fascist squads.

fn1 I.N.A.: The *Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni*, a large Italian insurance company.

fn1 A.R.A.R. camp: This was the *Azienda rilievo alienazione residuati*, an organization set up at the end of the Second World War for the sale of goods that had been confiscated from the enemy or abandoned by the Allies.